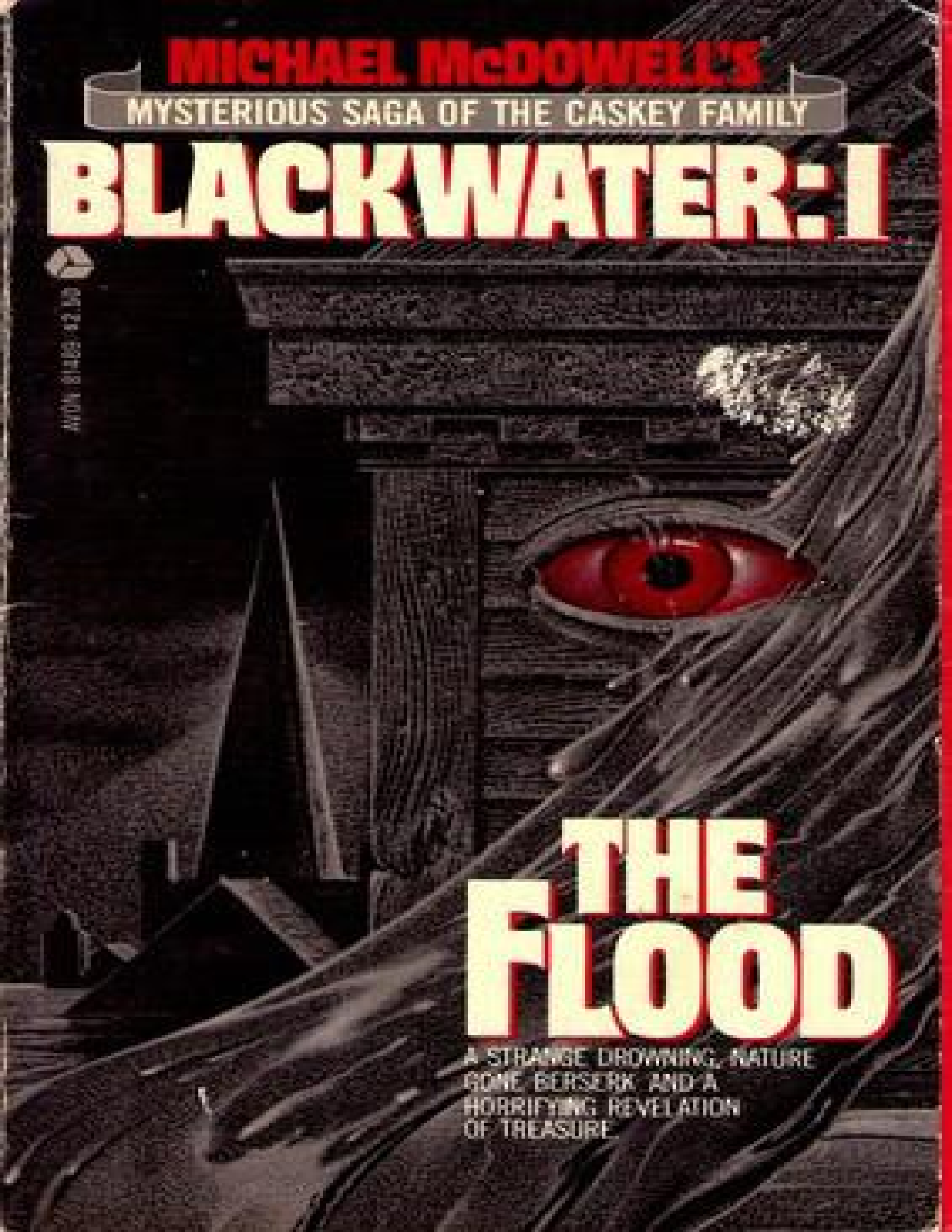
MICHAEL McDOWELL'S

MYSTERIOUS SAGA OF THE CASKEY FAMILY

BLACKWATER: I



THE FLOOD

A STRANGE DROWNING, NATURE GONE BERSERK AND A HORRIFYING REVELATION OF TREASURE

BLACKWATER: I
THE FLOOD

Michael McDowell

For Mama El

AVON BOOKS

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The maenad loves—and furiously defends herself against love's importunity. She loves— and kills. From the depths of sex, from the dark, primeval past of the battles of the sexes arise this splitting and bifurcating of the female soul, wherein woman first finds the wholeness and primal integrity of her feminine consciousness. So tragedy is born of the female essence's assertion of itself as a dyad.

-VYACHESLAV IVANOV, "The Essence of Tragedy" (tr. Laurence Senelick)

I will spunge out the sweetness of my heart, And suck up horror; Love, woman's thoughts,

I'll kill,

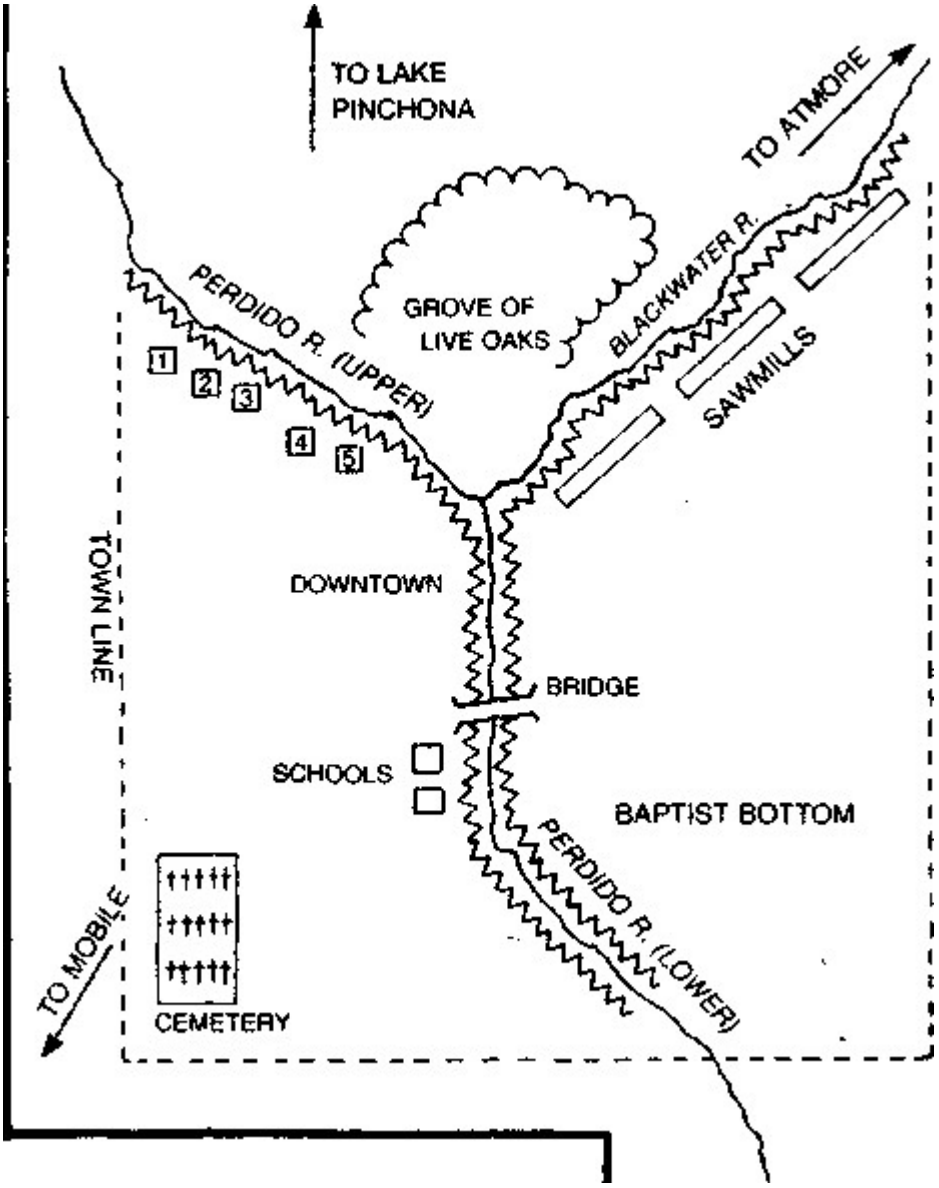
And leave their bodies rotting in my mind, Hoping their worms will sting; not man outside,

Yet will I out of hate engender much: I'll be the father of a world of ghosts And get the grave with carcase.

-THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES, "Love's Arrow Poisoned"

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Perdido, Alabama, does indeed exist, and in the place I have put it. Yet it does not now, nor ever did possess the buildings, geography, or population I ascribe to it. The Perdido and Blackwater rivers, moreover, have no junction at all. Yet the landscapes and persons I describe, I venture to say, are not wholly imaginary.



Perdido, Alabama
pop. 1,200 SITE OF LEVEE WA

1. OSCAR & ELINOR CASKEY'S HOME
2. MARY-LOVE CASKEY'S HOME
3. JAMES CASKEY'S HOME
4. DeBORDENAVES HOME
5. TURK S HOME

TO GULF OF MEXICO

PROLOGUE

At dawn on Easter Sunday morning, 1919, the cloudless sky over Perdido, Alabama, was a pale translucent pink not reflected in the black waters that for the past week had entirely flooded the town. The sun, immense and reddish-orange, had risen just above the pine forest on the far side of what had been Baptist Bottom. This was the low-lying area of Perdido where all the emancipated blacks had huddled in 1865, and where their children and grandchildren huddled still. Now it was only a murky swirl of planks and tree limbs and bloated dead animals. Of downtown Perdido no more was to be seen than the town hall, with its four-faced tower clock, and the second floor of the Osceola Hotel. Only memory might tell where the courses of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers had lain scarcely a week before. All twelve hundred inhabitants of Perdido had fled to higher ground. The town rotted beneath a wide sheet of stinking, still black water, which only now was beginning to recede. The pediments and gables and chimneys of houses that had not been broken up and washed away jutted up through the black shining surface of the flood, stone and brick and wooden emblems of distress. But no assistance came to their silent summonses, and driftwood and unidentifiable detritus and scraps of clothing and household furnishings swept against them and were caught and formed reeking nests around those upraised fingers.

Black water lapped lazily against the brick walls of the town hall and the Osceola Hotel. The water was otherwise silent and unmoving. People who have never lived through a flood may imagine that fish swim in and out of the broken windows of submerged houses, but they don't. In the first place, the windows don't break, for no matter how well constructed a house may have been, the water rises through the floorboards, and the windowless pantry is flooded to the same depth as the front porch. And beyond that, the fish keep

to the old riverbeds, just as if they hadn't twenty or thirty feet more of new freedom above that. Floodwater is foul, and filled with foul things, and catfish and bream, though they don't like the unaccustomed darkness, swim in confused circles around their old rocks and their old weeds and their familiar bridge pilings.

Someone standing in the little square room directly beneath the town hall clocks, and peering out the narrow vertical window that looked west, might have seen approaching across that flat black unreflecting surface of still rank water, as out of what remained of the night, a solitary rowboat with two men in it. Yet no one was in that room beneath the clocks, and the dust on the marble floor, and the birds' nests among the rafters, and the gentle whirr of the last bit of machinery that hadn't quite yet run down, remained undisturbed. There was no one to wind the clocks, for who had remained in Perdido when the waters had risen so high? The solitary rowboat plied its stately, solemn course unobserved. It came slowly from the direction of the millowners' fine houses that lay beneath the muddy waters of the Perdido River to the northwest. The boat, which was painted green—for some reason, all such boats in Perdido were painted green—was paddled by a black man about thirty years old. Sitting before him in the prow was a white man, only a few years younger.

Neither had spoken for some time. Each had stared about in wonder at the spectacle of Perdido— where they had been born and where they had been raised—submerged beneath eighteen feet of foul water. What Easter but that first in Jerusalem had dawned so bleakly, or stirred less hope in the breasts of those who had witnessed the rising of that morning's sun?

"Bray," said the white man at last, "row up toward the town hall."

"Mr. Oscar," protested the black man, "we don't know what's in them rooms."

The water had risen to the bottom of the second-floor windows.

"I want to see what's in the rooms, Bray. Go on over."

The black man reluctantly turned the boat in the direction of the town hall, and gave a hard, smooth impetus to the paddle. They sailed close. The boat actually bumped against the marble balustrade of the second-floor balcony.

“You not going in!” cried Bray, when Oscar Gas-key reached out and grasped one of the thick balusters.

Oscar shook his head. The baluster was covered with the slime of the flood. He attempted to wipe it off on his trousers, but succeeded only in transferring some of the stink.

“Nearer that window.”

Bray maneuvered the boat to the first window to the right of the balcony.

The sun hadn’t got around to that side of the building yet, and the office—that of the town registrar— was dim. The water lay in a shallow black pool over most of the floor. Chairs and tables were scattered about, and a number of file cabinets had been toppled. Others, whose thickly packed contents had become sodden with floodwater, had burst open under the pressure of expansion. Thick rotting sheaves of official county and town documents lay scattered everywhere. A rejected application for voting privileges in the 1872 election lay on the windowsill, and Oscar could even make out the name on it.

“What you see, Mr. Oscar?”

“Not much. I see damage. I see trouble ahead when the water goes down.”

“This whole town’s gone have trouble when the water go down. So let’s don’t look in no more windows, Mr. Oscar. Don’t know what we gone see.”

“What could we see?” Oscar turned around and looked at the black man. Bray had worked for the Caskeys since he was eight years old. He had been hired as a playmate to Oscar, then only four; had

graduated into an errand boy, and then to the Gas-keys' principal gardener. His common-law wife, Ivey Sapp, was the Caskey cook.

Bray Sugarwhite continued to paddle the little green boat down the middle of Palafox Street. Oscar Caskey gazed to the right and the left, and attempted to recollect whether the barbershop had a triangular pediment with a carved wooden ball atop it, or whether that ornament belonged to Berta Hamilton's dress shop. The Osceola Hotel loomed up on the right, fifty yards farther on. Its hanging sign had been dislodged sometime on Friday, and probably by this time, was knocking upside of a shrimp boat five miles out in the Gulf of Mexico.

"We not gone look in any more windows, are we, Mr. Oscar?" said Bray apprehensively as they got nearer the hotel. Oscar in the prow was peering this way and that around the sides of that building.

"Bray, I thought I saw something move in one of those windows."

"That the sun," said Bray quickly. "That the sun on them dirty windows."

"It wasn't a reflection," said Oscar Caskey. "You do like I tell you, and you paddle up to that corner window."

"I'm not gone do it."

"Bray, you are gone do it," said Oscar Caskey, not even turning around, "so don't bother telling me you're not. Just go up to that corner window."

"I'm not gone look in no more windows," said Bray, not completely under his breath. Then aloud, as he was changing course and paddling nearer the second floor of the hotel, he said, "Pro'bly rats in there. When the water 'gin to rise in Baptist Bottom, I see the rats come up out of their holes, and they run along the top of the fences. Rats know where it's dry. Ever'body get out of Perdido last Wednesday, it was. So not nothing in that hotel but them smart rats."

The boat bumped against the eastern facade of the brick hotel. The sun reflected a blinding red against the glass panes. Oscar

peered through the window nearest him.

All the furniture inside the small hotel room— the bed, the dresser, the chifforobe, the washstand, and the hat rack—were jumbled together in the middle of the floor as if thrown together at the center of a maelstrom that had sunk into the first story. All of it was covered with mud. The carpet, muddy and stiff and black, was bunched together in the corner against the door. In the dimness Oscar could not make out the high-water mark on the dark wallpaper.

The carpet trembled, and Oscar saw two large rats rush from a fold of the rug toward the hill of furniture in the center of the room. Oscar jerked his gaze from the window.

“Rats?” asked Bray. “See! I tell you, Mr. Oscar, nothing in this hotel but rats. Don’t need to be looking through no more windows.”

Oscar Caskey didn’t answer Bray, but he stood up, and, grasping the frame of the tattered awning of the next window, he pulled the boat toward the corner of the hotel.

“Bray,” said Oscar Caskey, “this is the window where I saw something move. I saw something pass in front of this window, and it wasn’t any rat ‘cause rats aren’t five feet high.”

“Rats been feeding on the flood,” said Bray, though what he meant to suggest Oscar wasn’t certain.

Oscar leaned forward in the boat, grasping the concrete casement of the window with both hands. He peered through the dirty panes.

The corner room appeared to have been untouched by the floodwaters. The bed, quietly made, stood where it ought, against the long corridor wall, and the rug was squarely arranged beneath it. The chif-forobe and the dresser and the washstand were in their places. Nothing had fallen to the floor and broken. However, where the sun, shining through the eastern window, illuminated a large patch of the carpet, Oscar saw that it was sopping wet—so that he was forced to conclude that the water had risen through the floorboards.

But why the furniture in this room should have remained so placidly in place while everything in the adjoining chamber had been broken apart and tossed together and—as a last indignity—sheeted in black mud, Oscar could not puzzle out.

“Bray,” he said, “I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Don’t you try to make nothing of it,” replied Bray. “And I don’t know what you talking about anyway, Mr. Oscar.”

“Nothing’s disturbed in this room. The floor’s just wet.”

Oscar had turned to speak these last words to Bray, who shook his head and again indicated his wish to be well away from this half-submerged building. He was afraid Oscar would want to circle the hotel and look in every last window.

Oscar turned back in order to push off from the concrete casement. He glanced in the window, and then fell back into the boat with a small strangled cry of alarm.

In that room, which five seconds before had been patently unoccupied, he had seen a woman. She sat quietly on the edge of the bed with her back to the window.

Bray, not waiting for an explanation for Oscar’s evident fright—and wanting none—immediately began to paddle off away from the hotel.

“Bray! Go back! Row back!” cried Oscar when he had recovered his voice.

“No, Mr. Oscar, I ain’t gone.”

“Bray, I’m telling you…”

Bray reluctantly paddled back. Oscar was reaching for the casement when the window shot up in its frame.

Bray stiffened with his paddle in the water. The boat rammed against the brick wall, and the black man and the white man rocked backward and forward with the shock.

“I have waited and waited,” said the young woman standing in the open window.

She was tall, thin, pale, erect, and handsome. Her hair was a kind of muddy red, thick, and wound in a loose coil. She wore a black skirt and a white blouse. There was a rectangular gold-and-jet brooch at her throat.

“Who are you?” said Oscar in wonder.

“Elinor Dammert.”

“I mean,” said Oscar, “why are you here?”

“In the hotel?”

“Yes.”

“I was caught by the flood. I couldn’t get away.”

“Ever’body got out of the hotel,” said Bray. “They got out or they took ‘em out. Last Wednesday.”

“They forgot me,” said Elinor. “I was asleep. They forgot I was here. I didn’t hear them call.”

“Town hall bell rang for two hours,” said Bray sullenly.

“Are you all right?” asked Oscar. “How long have you been here?”

“As he says, since Wednesday. Four days. I’ve been sleeping most of the time. Not much else to do when there’s a flood. Have you got anything in that boat I can have?”

“To eat?” Oscar asked.

“Got nothing,” said Bray shortly.

“There’s nothing,” said Oscar. “I’m sorry, we should have brought something.”

“Why?” asked Elinor. “You didn’t expect to find anybody still in the hotel, did you?”

“Surely did not!” said Bray in a tone of voice which suggested that the surprise had in fact been not completely agreeable.

“Hush!” cried Oscar, annoyed by Bray’s rudeness, and wondering at it, too. “Are you all right?” he repeated. “What did you do when the water was high?”

“Nothing,” replied Elinor. “I sat on the edge of the bed and waited for somebody to come and get me.”

“When I first looked in the window, you weren’t there. There wasn’t anybody in the room.”

“I was there,” said Elinor. “You just couldn’t see me through the window right. There must have been a reflection on the glass. I was just sitting there. I didn’t hear you at first.”

There was silence a moment. Bray looked at Elinor Dammert with deep mistrust. Oscar bowed his head and tried to puzzle out what to do.

“Is there room for me in that boat?” asked Elinor after a bit.

“Of course!” cried Oscar. “We’ll take you away. You must be starved.”

“Pull the boat around,” said Elinor to Bray, “right under the window, and I’ll climb out.”

Bray did so. Holding on to the awning with one hand, Oscar stood and gave Elinor his other. She lifted her skirt and stepped gracefully out of the hotel window into the boat. Quite at her ease, and giving no indication of the terror she must have felt at being for four days the only occupant of a town that was almost completely submerged, Elinor Dammert squeezed herself in the boat between Oscar Caskey and Bray Sugarwhite.

“Miss Elinor, my name is Oscar Caskey, and this is Bray. Bray works for us.”

“How do you do, Bray?” said Elinor, turning to him with a smile.

“Fine, ma’am,” said Bray in a tone and with a frown that contradicted his words.

“We’ll get you to high ground,” said Oscar.

“Is there room for my things?” said Elinor, as the black man pushed his paddle against the bricks of the Osceola Hotel.

“No,” replied Oscar regretfully, “we are pretty tight in here now. I tell you what, though—soon as Bray gets us to dry land, he can come back here and pick ‘em up.”

“I cain’t go inside that place!” Bray protested.

“Bray, you are gone do it!” said Oscar. “You realize what Miss Elinor has just been through for four days? When you and me and Mama and Sister were high and dry? And eating breakfast, dinner, and a little supper and complaining just because we brought two packs of cards away with us instead of four? You realize what Miss Elinor must have been thinking about, all alone in that hotel, with the water rising?”

“Bray,” said Elinor Dammert, “I have just two little bags and I put ‘em right beside the window on the floor. All you have to do is reach in.”

• • •

Bray paddled in silence, headed back the way he and Oscar had come. He stared at the back of the young woman who had had no business at all being found where she was found.

Oscar, in the front of the boat, wanted very much to find something to say to Miss Elinor Dammert, but could think of nothing at all—certainly no remark came to mind that would justify his turning right around in the boat and awkwardly speaking to her over his shoulder. Lucidly, as he thought it, the carcass of a large raccoon suddenly bobbed to the surface of the oily black water when they had just passed the town hall, and Oscar explained that pigs, attempting

to swim through the floodwater, had slashed their own throats with their forefeet. It was an undetermined point whether they all had drowned or bled to death. Miss Elinor smiled and nodded and said nothing. Oscar said nothing further, and did not turn around again until Bray was paddling past Oscar's own house. "That's where I live," said Oscar, pointing out the second story of the submerged Cas-key mansion. Miss Elinor nodded and smiled, and said that it looked like a very big and very pretty house and she wished she could see it sometime when it wasn't underwater. Oscar heartily concurred in that wish; Bray did not. Only a few minutes later Bray ran the boat up between two large exposed roots of a vast live oak that marked the town line to the northwest. Oscar stood out of the boat, balancing on one of the roots, and then helped Elinor on to dry land. Elinor turned to Bray. "Thank you," she said. "I really do 'predate you going back. Those two bags are all I've got, Bray, and I've got to have them or I've got nothing. I put 'em both right inside the window, and all you have to do is reach inside." Then she and Oscar set out together for the Zion Grace Church, which was on high ground a mile away, where the first families of Perdido had taken refuge.

A quarter of an hour later, Bray had maneuvered the little boat back against the side of the Osceola Hotel. The water, in even so short a time, had dropped several inches. He sat for several moments just staring at that blank open window, wondering how he would ever get the courage up to stick his arm inside and retrieve the bags. "Hungry!" he cried aloud to himself. "What'd that white woman eat?!" The sound of his own voice strengthened him—even though it had defined a portion of that unpleasant mystery he felt surrounded Elinor Dammert—and he turned the boat so that he could lean his shoulder against the brick wall of the hotel. Holding on to the concrete casement with one hand, he reached his other arm quickly into the room. His hand closed around the handle of a suitcase. He jerked it out of the window and into the boat. He took a deep breath, and thrust his arm in once more.

His hand closed around… nothing.

He jerked it out again. He stared at the sun a moment through squinting eyes, cocked his ear and heard nothing but the scraping of the boat against the orange bricks of the hotel, thrust his hand in again and moved it all about beneath the window inside the room. No second case was there.

Now there was nothing for it but actually to look into the hotel room—to put his head into the blank opening and stare around, looking for Miss Elinor's second bag.

With an unpleasant consciousness that he was the only person in all Perdido at that moment, Bray sat down again in the boat and considered the matter. He might, if he peered into the window, see the case within reach. That, definitely, was the most hopeful possibility, for then he could bring it out almost as simply as he had brought out the other. He might, however, see the case out of his reach. This would necessitate climbing through the window. He would not do that—but that would be all right, because he could always report to Mr. Oscar that he could not get out of the boat because he had been unable to tether it.

Bray stood up in the boat and steadied himself by grasping the awning. He looked in the window, but could not see the second case at all. It simply wasn't there.

Without thinking, he leaned inside the window and peered all along the outer wall. His fear had been subsumed by curiosity.

"Lord have mercy," he murmured. "Mr. Oscar," he said to himself, rehearsing the speech that would procure pardon for his failure to bring back both bags, "I look all over that room, and it just not there. Would have gone but not no place to tie the boat to, I—"

But there was—a little tongue of painted metal around which the cord of the Venetian blind had been wound. Bray cursed his own eyes for picking that out. He knew he couldn't lie to Mr. Oscar, no matter what his fear now, and still cursing his eyes and his inability to tell Mr. Oscar anything but gospel truth, he tied the slender mooring rope of the boat around that tongue of painted metal. When the boat

was tethered to the window he carefully raised one foot onto the casement, and in a single slow bound found himself inside the hotel room.

The carpet was sopping wet. Foul floodwater was squeezed from beneath his boots. The morning sunlight poured into the room through the window in the eastern wall. Bray approached the bed where Mr. Oscar had seen Miss Elinor sitting. Experimentally, he pressed a finger against the spread. It too was sopping—and coated with a black grime. Though he had pressed lightly, foul water formed a dank pool around that finger. "It wasn't there," said Bray aloud, still rehearsing the conversation he would have with Mr. Oscar. Why didn't you look under the bed? demanded Mr. Oscar in Bray's voice.

Bray leaned down. Black grimy water dripped from the fringe of the spread all around. Beneath the bed was a grimy black pool of stinking water. "Lord my Lord! Where'd that white woman sleep?" cried Bray in a whisper. He turned around quickly. No suitcase. He went to the chifforobe and opened it. Nothing was in it but an inch of water in each of the drawers on the left-hand side. There wasn't a closet in the room or anywhere else for the case to have been hidden —even supposing Miss Elinor had wanted to keep him from finding it, and Miss Elinor had particularly wanted him to fetch it. "Lord, Mr. Oscar! Somebody come and done stole it!"

Bray was already headed back to the window, but Mr. Oscar, in Bray's voice, demanded now, Well, Bray, why didn't you look out in the hall?

" 'Cause," whispered Bray, "that old room was bad enough…"

The hallway door was closed, but there was a key in the lock. Bray moved over to the door and tried the handle. The door was locked, so he turned the key. The key itself was grimy and black. Bray pulled the door open.

He looked down the long uncarpeted hallway. There was no case. He saw nothing. He paused a moment, waiting for Mr. Oscar's voice to demand that he go farther. But no voice came. Bray breathed

relief, and eased the door closed. He returned to the window and climbed carefully out into the boat. It was while he untied the tethering rope slowly, savoring the notion of his having come through this unpleasant adventure safely, that Bray noticed what he had not seen before: the sunlight shining through the window now illuminated the high-water mark on the dark-papered walls. It was two feet higher than the head of Elinor Dammert's carefully made bed. If the water had risen so high as that, how had the woman survived?

CHAPTER I
The Ladies of Perdido

The Zion Grace Baptist Church was situated on the Old Federal Road about a mile and a half outside Perdido. Its congregation was Hard-Shell, so the church was about the most uncomfortable sort of structure imaginable: a single whitewashed room with a vaulted ceiling that trapped the heat in the summer and the cold in February; that housed boisterous crickets in winter and flying cockroaches in July. It was an old building, raised on brick pilings some years before the Civil War, and beneath it, in the dark sand, lived sometimes polecats and sometimes rattlesnakes.

The members of the Perdido Hard-Shell congregation were known for three things: their benches, which were very hard; their sermons, which were very long; and their minister, a tiny woman with black hair and a shrill laugh, called Annie Bell Driver. Sometimes people put up with the backless benches and the three-hour sermons simply for the novelty of hearing a woman stand at the front of the church, behind a pulpit, and speak of sin, damnation, and the wrath of God. Annie Bell had an insignificant husband, three insignificant sons, and a girl called Ruthie who was going to grow up to be just like her.

When the waters of the rivers began to rise, Annie Bell Driver threw open the doors of the Zion Grace Church to house any who might be driven from their homes. As it happened, the first to be driven from their homes on that side of town were the three richest families of Perdido—the Caskeys, the Turks, and the DeBordenaves. These three families owned the three sawmills and lumberyards in town, and lumber comprised the whole of Perdido's industry.

So, as the waters of the muddy red Perdido rose over their back lawns, the three rich families of Perdido got wagons and mules from their mills and backed them up to the front porches of their fine houses and filled them with trunks and barrels and crates of food and clothing and valuables. What couldn't be taken away was carried to the tops of the houses. Only the heaviest furniture was allowed to remain on the lower floors, as it was thought that these pieces would survive high water.

The wagons were covered with tarpaulin and driven up through the forest to the church. The families followed in their automobiles and the servants came on foot. Despite the tarpaulins, despite the canvas covering on the automobiles, despite the umbrellas and the newspapers that the servants held atop their heads, despite even the thick canopy of the pine forest itself, everyone and everything arrived soaked with rainwater.

The benches had been moved out of the way and mattresses were brought in and laid out over the floor of the church. The white women got one corner, the black servants got another, the children a third, and the fourth was reserved for the preparation of food. This refuge was an expediency only for the women and children—all the men stayed in town, preserving what they could at the sawmills, helping the merchants raise their wares from the lower shelves to the upper, removing the infirm and persuading the recalcitrant to move to higher ground. When the town was finally abandoned to the waters, the Caskey, Turk, and DeBordenave men and male servants slept in the Driver house, a hundred yards up the road from the church. The children looked on all this business rather as an adventure; the servants looked on it as greater and less pleasant work than they were used to; the rich wives, mothers, and daughters of the millowners said nothing of difficulty and inconvenience, did not mourn their homes and their belongings, smiled for the children and the servants and themselves, and made quite a pet of little Ruthie Driver. The Zion Grace Church had been their home five days.

On Easter Sunday morning, Mary-Love Caskey and her daughter, Sister, sat with Annie Bell Driver in the corner of the church. They were the only ones awake in the large room. Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk lay closest to them on adjoining mattresses; they were turned toward each other and snoring lightly. The servants lay with their children in the far corner, now and then stirring, or crying out softly at a dream of high water or water moccasins, or raising a head and looking blearily about for a moment before falling asleep again.

"Stand outside the door," said Mary-Love quietly to Sister, "and see if you see Bray and your brother coming up the road."

Sister rose obediently. She was thin and angular, like her widowed mother. Her hair was the usual Caskey hair: fine and strong, but of no particular color, and therefore undistinguished. She was only twenty-seven, but every woman in Perdido—white or black, rich or poor—knew that Sister Caskey would never marry or leave home.

The wagons with all the Caskey, Turk, and DeBordenave goods had been drawn up before the church and were guarded day and night by one or another of the servants with a loaded shotgun. The DeBordenaves' driver sat sleeping now on the buck-board of the wagon nearest the road, and Sister walked quietly so as not to disturb him. She peered down the wagon track through the pine forest in the direction of Perdido. The sun was just rising over the tall pines and shined in her eyes, but the light in the forest was still dim and green and morning-misty. She craned her head this way and that. The driver stirred on the buckboard, and said, "That you, Miz Caskey?"

"Have you seen Bray and my brother?"

"Haven't seen 'em, Miz Caskey."

"Go on back to sleep then. It's Easter morning."

"The Lord is risen!" the driver cried softly, and lowered his head to his chest.

Sister Caskey shaded her eyes from the watery morning sun that was the color of cheap country butter. A man and a woman stepped through a veil of mist in the forest and paused in the wagon track.

“Where’d your girl go?” asked Annie Bell Driver.

“Well,” said Mary-Love, craning her head, “I told her to walk outside and see if she could see Oscar and Bray. They went into town to see what the damage was. I didn’t want them to, Miz Driver. I didn’t want them in a rowboat. Oscar since he was little was always trailing his fingers in the water, not thinking about it. There’s nothing in the water but water moccasins and leeches, I know it for a fact, so I told Bray to watch out for him. But Bray doesn’t pay any attention,” Mary Love finished with a rueful sigh.

Sister appeared in the doorway.

“You see them, Sister?” demanded Mary-Love.

“I see Oscar,” said Sister with hesitation.

“Is Bray with him?” asked Mary-Love.

“I didn’t see Bray.”

“I want to speak to Oscar,” said Mary-Love, rising.

“Mama,” said Sister. “Oscar’s got somebody with him.”

“Who is it?”

“It’s a lady.”

“What lady?” Mary-Love Caskey went to the open door of the church and peered out. She saw her son, a hundred feet away in the track-road, standing talking with a woman who was thinner and more angular than Mary-Love herself.

“Who is it, Mama? She’s got red hair.”

“Sister, I don’t know.”

Annie Bell Driver stood behind Mary-Love and Sister. “Is she from Perdido?” the preacher asked.

“No!” cried Mary-Love definitely. “Nobody in Perdido has hair that color!”

From the live oak where Bray Sugarwhite deposited Oscar Caskey and the rescued Elinor Dammert a wagon track ran through the pine forest. It went past the Zion Grace Church and the Driver house, crossed the Old Federal Road, and ended three miles farther on in a sugarcane camp run by a black family called Sapp.

Oscar Caskey was the first gentleman of Perdido; even in a town so small, that distinction goes for something. He was first gentleman not only by right of birth—being the acknowledged heir of the Caskeys—but also by his appearance and his natural bearing. He was tall and angular, like all the Caa-keys, but his movements were looser and more graceful than those of either his sister or his mother. His features were fine and mobile, his speech was careful and elegantly facetious. There was a brightness in his blue eyes, and he seemed always to be suppressing a smile. He had a courtly kind of manner that did not alter according to whom he spoke—he was as courteous to Bray’s common-law wife as he was to the rich manufacturer from Boston who had come to inspect the Caskey lumberyard.

On Easter morning, as Oscar and Elinor walked along, the sun behind them shone through the top branches of the pines. Steam rose out of the dew on the underlying carpet of pine needles, and billowed around them. Great sheets of water, still and steaming, lay now and then in slight depressions on either side of the track where the water table had risen above the level of the ground.

“That’s not river water, that’s groundwater,” Oscar pointed out. “You could get down on your hands and knees like a dog and lap it.” He stiffened suddenly, with the fear that this had perhaps been an impolite suggestion. To cover up the possible awkwardness, he turned to Miss Elinor and asked, “What did you drink in the Osceola? I believe, Miss Elinor, that it’s just not possible to drink floodwater without dying on the spot.”

“I didn’t have anything to drink at all,” replied Elinor. She didn’t seem to care that she mystified him.

“Miss Elinor, you went thirsty for four days?”

“I don’t go thirsty,” said Elinor, smiling. “But I do go hungry.” She rubbed her stomach as if to soothe rumblings there, though Oscar had heard none and Miss Elinor certainly did not give the appearance of having gone four days without food. They continued some yards in silence.

“Why were you here?” Oscar asked politely.

“In Perdido? I came for work.”

“And what is it you do?”

“I’m a teacher.”

“My uncle is on the board,” said Oscar eagerly. “Maybe he can get you a job. Why did you come to Perdido? Perdido is out of the way. Perdido is at the end of the earth. Who comes to Perdido except to write me a check for lumber?”

“I guess the flood brought me,” Elinor laughed.

“Have you experienced a flood before this?”

“Lots,” she replied. “Lots and lots…”

Oscar Caskey sighed. Elinor Dammert was, in some obscure manner, laughing at him. He reflected that she would fit in well in Perdido, if indeed his uncle did find her a job at the school. In Perdido all the women made fun of all the men. Those Yankee drummers coming in and staying at the Osceola talked to the men who ran the mills, and shopped in the stores where the men of Perdido stood behind the counters, and had their hair cut—by a man — while they talked to the men who loafed about the barbershop all morning and afternoon long, but they never once suspected that it was really the women who ran Perdido. Oscar wondered if that were the case in other towns of Alabama. It might, he thought suddenly and terribly, be true everywhere. But men, when they got together,

never talked about their powerlessness, nor was it written about in the paper, nor did senators make speeches about it on the floor of Congress—and yet, as he walked beside her through the damp pine forest, Oscar Caskey suspected that if Elinor Dammert was representative of the women of other places (for she must have come from somewhere), then it was likely that men were powerless in towns other than Perdido as well.

"Where are you from?" he asked, a question which followed naturally in the train of his thought.

"North."

"You're not Yankee!" he exclaimed. Elinor's accent didn't grate like a Northerner's, certainly, for it had Southern rhythms and its vowels were sufficiently liquid for Oscar's ear. But there was something strange about it nonetheless, as though Elinor were more accustomed to some other language—not English at all. He had a sudden mental picture, as strong as it was improbable, of Elinor lying on the bed in the Osceola, listening to the voices of men in the rooms all up and down the hallway, imitating their patterns and storing their vocabularies.

"North Alabama, I mean," she said.

"What town? Do I know it?"

"Wade."

"I do not know it."

"Fayette County."

"Did you go to school?"

"Huntingdon. And I have a certificate to teach. It's in my bag that Bray's getting. I hope he won't let anything happen to my bags. I've got all my credentials in one of'em." She spoke her concern a little absently—not as if she really cared what happened to the bags, but as if she had suddenly remembered that she ought to care.

“Bray is a colored gentleman with a large bump of responsibility,” said Oscar, touching his forehead as if to point out where that bump might have raised itself upon Bray’s head. “As a younger man, he was apt to shirk his duties, but I beat him over the head with a two-by-four, raised a welt in the proper place, and he’s never failed me since.” As he spoke these words Oscar suddenly decided, in another part of his brain, that he might charitably and conveniently attribute all Miss Elinor’s mysteriousness to mental confusion brought on by four days spent alone in a flooded hotel. “But I still don’t understand why you came to Perdido,” he persisted.

A veil of mist blew away before them and they were suddenly within sight of the church. His sister stood on the front steps, evidently watching out for him.

“Because,” said Elinor with a smile, “I heard there was something here for me.”

Oscar introduced Elinor Dammert to his mother, his sister, and to the female preacher of the Zion Grace Church.

“No sunrise service this year,” said Annie Bell Driver. “There’s too much trouble in the town. If people can sleep knowing their houses and their chattels are underwater, I say let ‘em sleep.”

“Miss Elinor came to Perdido looking for a job in the school for next fall,” said Oscar, “and she got caught in the Osceola when the water started to rise. Bray and I just now found her.”

“Where are your clothes? Where are your things, Miss Elinor?” cried Sister in sympathetic alarm.

“You must have lost everything,” said Mary-Love, staring at Elinor’s hair. “Floodwater takes everything. I’m surprised you got away with your life.”

“I’ve got nothing at all,” said Elinor with a smile that was neither brave resignation nor studied indifference, but a smile that seemed to mock credence.

“Where were you coming from?” asked Annie Bell Driver. One of the children, a colored one, had awakened inside the church and now peered sleepily out the front door.

“I graduated from Huntingdon,” said Elinor Dammert. “I came to teach in the school here.”

“The schoolhouse is underwater,” said Oscar with a sad shaking of his head. “A school of bream have the run of it.”

“I saw two desks floating down Palafox Street,” said Sister Caskey.

“Only thing the teachers saved was their grade books,” said Mary-Love.

“Have you got anything to eat?” asked Elinor. “I’ve been sitting on the side of a bed in the Osceola Hotel for four days watching the water rise. I had one tin of salmon and a box of crackers and I am fainting on my feet.”

“Carry Miss Elinor inside!” cried Annie Bell Driver.

Sister took Elinor’s hand and led her up to the steps of the church. “Bray got some tins out of Mr. Henderson’s store after it was already underwater,” said Sister. “The labels were all washed off so we don’t know what’s in ‘em till we open ‘em. Sometimes we get green beans for breakfast and English peas for supper, but you can tell the salmon cans by their shape. ‘Course, you won’t have to eat any more salmon unless you want it!”

“Thank you,” said Elinor, turning at the top of the steps, “for rescuing me, Mr. Oscar.”

Oscar would have followed her inside, but his mother touched his arm, saying, “You cain’t go in there, Oscar. Caroline and Manda are still in their nightclothes!”

Oscar watched Miss Elinor disappear, then said goodbye to his mother and turned his steps back onto the road in the direction of the Driver house. He tipped his hat politely to the sleeping driver.

Elinor was fed on salmon and crackers in the corner of the church. She sat on the end of one of the benches and stared at the little sleeping map of children in the corner opposite. All the servants had risen and were huddled in a distant corner to wash and dress as best they could under the difficult circumstances. Sister Caskey sat beside Elinor, and now and then whispered a question that was answered in a whisper.

Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk had risen in time to see the stranger led inside by Sister Caskey. They dressed quickly and ran out of the church to question Mary-Love, who waited for them on the other side of one of the wagons. The three women fell immediately to a discussion of Elinor Dammert's muddy red hair and the peculiar circumstance of her having been left for four days in the Osceola Hotel.

Their only conclusion was that the circumstance was something more than just peculiar—it was downright mysterious.

"I wish," said Caroline DeBordenave, a large woman with a tremulous smile, "that Oscar would come back down the road so that we could ask him a question or two about Miss Elinor."

"Oscar wouldn't know anything," said even larger Manda Turk, whose habitual frown was anything but tremulous.

"Why not?" asked Caroline. "Oscar pulled her out the window of the Osceola Hotel. Oscar rowed her back to dry land. Oscar must have spoken a word or two along the way."

"Men never know what questions to ask," replied Manda. "Won't learn anything asking Oscar about it. Isn't that right, Mary-Love?"

"It is," said Mary-Love. "I'm afraid it is, even if I do have to say it about my own son. Sister's talking to her now. Maybe Sister can get a little something out of her."

"Here comes Bray," said Manda Turk, pointing down the track into the pine forest. The sun, higher now and warmer, was drawing more steam up from the sodden ground. The black man had

appeared quite suddenly out of the mist, swinging a small suitcase in his right hand.

“Is that your bag?” asked Caroline DeBordenave of Mary-Love.

“It is not,” replied Mary-Love. “It must be hers.”

“Is that her bag, Bray?” Manda Turk called loudly.

“Sure is,” replied Bray, coming closer and knowing that “her” referred to the woman who had been rescued from the Osceola.

“What’s in it?” asked Caroline.

“Don’t know, didn’t open it,” replied Bray. He paused. “She inside the church?” he asked.

“She’s eating her breakfast with Sister,” said Mary-Love.

“They was two bags,” said Bray, coming up to the three ladies.

“Where is the other?” said Caroline.

“Did you leave it back in the boat?” said Manda.

“Don’t know where it is,” said Bray.

“You lost it?” cried Mary-Love. “That girl has two bags to her name in this world, and you lost one of ‘em!”

“She’s gone be mad at you, Bray,” said Manda Turk. “She’s gone bite your head off!”

Bray shuddered, as if he feared the prediction might prove literally true. “I don’t know where that old thing is, Miz Turk. Mr. Oscar and me get that lady in the boat, and she say two bags sitting inside the window. I bring that lady and Mr. Oscar out here, and Mr. Oscar tell me, ‘Bray, row back,’ so I row back and I reach in that window, and they one bag there. Only one bag. Now, where the other one go?”.

None of the women ventured an answer to Bray’s question. The black man handed the bag to Mary-Love. “Maybe something reach

up out of the water and put a hand inside the window feeling around and it feel that bag and it pull it down under the water."

"Nothing in that water but old dead chickens," said Manda Turk contemptuously.

"Wonder what's in there," mused Caroline, nodding at the case in Bray's hand.

Mary-Love shook her head. To Bray she said, "Bray, you go on down to Miz Driver's house and get you something to eat. I'll tell Miss Elinor you did what you could."

"Oh, thank you, Miz Caskey, I don't want to say nothing to her…"

He pulled away from the tree against which he had been leaning and went hurriedly down the track. The three women looked down at Elinor Dammert's remaining bag—a weathered black leather case with straps going all around it—and then went inside the church.

It didn't matter to Elinor Dammert, evidently, that one of her bags had been lost. She didn't blame Bray; she didn't suggest that he had dropped the bag into the water and then lied about it; she didn't wonder if someone else in a rowboat might have passed the hotel, reached in and filched it; she didn't seem to upset herself over the loss of half of what little she had in the world. She said merely, "It had my books in it. And my teacher's certificate. And my diploma from Huntingdon. And my birth certificate. I'll have to write for duplicates. Does that take long?" she asked Sister. Sister had no idea, but supposed that it might.

"I'd like to wash up and change my clothes," Elinor said.

"There's nowhere for that," said Sister. "We bring water up from the branch."

"Oh, of course," said Miss Elinor, quite as if she knew every foot of its watery length.

"The branch down behind the church," said Caroline DeBordenave, as if Miss Elinor had asked What branch?—as she

ought to have. “You cain’t see it ‘less you know where to look.”

“Didn’t it flood, too?” Elinor asked.

“No, ma’am,” replied Miz Driver. “Land back of here slopes off quickly. All the water runs right down to the Perdido. That branch is clean and clear.”

“Good,” said Elinor, “then I’ll go down and bathe.”

She got up immediately, and Sister would have shown her the way, but Elinor assured her that she would be able to find it without assistance. Elinor stepped quietly among the still-sleeping children and walked out the back door carrying her weathered black bag with her.

Manda Turk and Mary-Love and Caroline DeBordenave fell upon Sister.

“What’d she say?” demanded Manda, speaking for all.

“Nothing,” said Sister, realizing in a sudden moment of shame that she had failed in what these three women evidently considered to be her duty. “I told her about the school and about Perdido. She was asking about the flood, you know, and the mills, and who everybody was and so forth.”

“Yes, but what did you ask her?” demanded Caroline.

“I asked her if she thought she was gone drown.”

“Drown?” said Mary-Love. “Sister, you are impossible!”

“Drown in the Osceola,” said Sister defensively. She was sitting on the end of the bench, and the three women stood ranged before her. “She said she wasn’t scared, not a bit—that she wasn’t gone drown ever in her life.”

“And that’s all you found out?” cried Manda.

“That’s all,” said Sister, cringing. “What was I supposed to find out? Nobody told me—”

“You were supposed to find out everything,” said her mother.

Caroline DeBordenave shook her head slowly. “Don’t you see, Sister?”

“See what?”

“See that there’s something peculiar.”

“See that there’s something wrong,” Manda amended.

“I don’t!”

“You must,” said Mary-Love. “Just look at her hair! You ever see hair that was that color? Looks like she had it dyed in the Perdido—that’s what it looks like to me!”

Annie Bell Driver knew what was going on. She had watched the three richest women in Perdido surround Bray and question him closely about the black bag he had carried; she had seen them turn their questions on poor meek Sister. She also knew where those questions tended. While Sister was vainly attempting to justify her failure to have found out anything of substance as a reluctance to pry, Annie Bell Driver slipped out the back door of the church, and with something in her head that wasn’t as clearly defined a motive as “curiosity,” she picked her way carefully down the slippery slope of pine needles, grabbing for balance at one resinous pine trunk after another. Steam rose here, too—in wisps from the ground, from the underbrush, from the green boughs of the pines, and almost in billows from the stream itself.

The branch was shallow, narrow, clear, and quick—quite unlike the dark, deep waters of the Blackwater and the Perdido. It made its way through the pine forest in a course that changed markedly every year, it seemed. It tore away the carpet of pine needles and left bare the soft shale beneath, hollowing out channels in the stone, throwing up diminutive islands of sand and pebbles.

Annie Bell Driver stood on the edge of the branch—it was too volatile a stream to have built up anything like a bank—and looked up and down what she could see of its length. There was a turn into the forest about a hundred feet up, and another turn in the opposite

direction about fifty feet down. The woman with the muddy-red hair wasn't to be seen. Annie Bell wondered whether she should walk upstream or downstream or return to the church, leaving the woman to her privacy. After all, having remained four days in the top floor of a half-submerged hotel, she would not have had an opportunity for washing except in the floodwaters—and that was an expedient which was no expedient at all, for it left one only dirtier than before, and was decidedly unhealthful.

Annie Bell decided to walk around the downstream bend, and turned in that direction. It was only then she noticed Elinor Dammert's black bag resting at one end of a sandbar directly across the water from where she stood. She had not noticed it before because it blended in so well with the rank vegetation on the opposite side of the branch.

The thought passed suddenly through her mind that Elinor Dammert, having survived the flooding of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers, had drowned in this tiny unnamed branch, but then she realized that in order to drown, one must first find a spot deep enough to cover one's head completely, and such spots were rare in the length of this shallow course. It was, in fact, so notoriously safe a stream that Annie Bell had never warned even her youngest children against using it. It wasn't deep enough to drown them, and it was too quick-moving to breed moccasins and leeches.

But if her bag was here, and she couldn't possibly be drowned, then where was Elinor Dammert?

Annie Bell Driver took two steps downstream and was reaching for a pine branch to lift her over a patch of soggy ground when she stopped suddenly. Her foot dropped to the earth and sank in until the water seeped through the holes for her laces.

There, beneath the water in a narrow trench that seemed to have been specially carved for her body, lay Elinor Dammert, quite naked. She clutched a clump of water weeds with each hand, but was perfectly still.

“Good Lord above!” cried Annie Bell Driver aloud. “She has gone and drowned herself!”

She stared. Though the water was clear and only deep enough to cover the body, it had worked a kind of visual transformation: Miss Elinor’s skin seen through that rapidly running water seemed leathery, greenish, tough—and Miss Elinor’s skin, Miz Driver had noted, was of a pellucid whiteness. Moreover, even as the preacher stared, a distorting transformation seemed to come over the features of the other woman’s submerged face. While before it had been handsome and narrow and fine-featured, now it seemed wide and flat and coarse. The mouth stretched to such an extent that the lips seemed to disappear altogether. The eyes beneath their closed lids grew into large, circular domes. The lids themselves became almost transparent, and the dark slit was set directly across the bulging eyeball like a pen-drawn Equator on a child’s globe.

She wasn’t dead.

The thin, stretched lids over those protuberant domes drew slowly apart and two immense eyes— the size of hen’s eggs, Miz Driver thought wildly— stared up through the water and met the gaze of the Hard-Shell preacher.

Annie. Bell Driver fell back against a tree. The branch she had been holding on to above her head snapped.

Elinor rose in the water. The transformation she had undergone beneath the running water held, and Miz Driver found herself staring at a vast, misshapen grayish-green creature with a slack body and an enormous head with cold staring eyes. The pupils were vertical and thin as pencil lines. Then, as the water poured off, back into the branch, Elinor Dammert stood before her, smiling sheepishly and blushing prettily in her modesty at being so discovered without her clothing.

Miz Driver took a deep breath and said, very quietly, “I’m so dizzy…”

“Miz Driver!” cried Miss Elinor. “Are you all right?” The muddiness seemed to have been washed from her hair. It was now a dark, intense red—like nothing so much as a clay bank shining in the brilliant sun that follows a July rainstorm, and nobody in Perdido knew anything that was redder than that.

“I’m all right,” said Annie Bell Driver weakly. “But, law, you scared me! What were you doing down in that water, girl?”

“Oh!” Elinor said in a light, smiling voice, “after going through a flood there’s just no other way to get clean—I know it for a fact, Miz Driver!”

She took a step upward and back onto the sandbar on which her bag had been placed, and if Miz Driver hadn’t still been so dizzy she would have been more certain that when Miss Elinor lifted her other foot out of that branch, it was not white and slender as was the one already braced upon the sand, but instead looked altogether different —wide and flat and gray and webbed.

Oh, but that was just the water! thought Annie Bell Driver, shutting her eyes tightly.

CHAPTER 2
The Waters Recede

James Caskey, Oscar's uncle and Mary-Love's brother-in-law, was a quiet, sensitive, fastidious man to whom trouble came easily and left grudgingly. He was slender ("bony," some said), mild, and quite well-off, at least by the standards of a small town in a poor county of an impoverished state. He was unhappily married, but his wife Genevieve, to Perdido's relief, spent most of her time with a married sister in Nashville. He had a six-year-old daughter called Grace, and he had—despite the possession of that wife and daughter—the reputation of being marked with "the stamp of femininity." He lived in the house his father had built in 1865. This had been the first substantial home raised in Perdido, though by current standards it was modest: just two parlors, a dining room, and three bedrooms—all on the same floor. The kitchen, which had originally been detached, had now been annexed to the house by the construction of a long addition, containing a nursery, a sewing room, and two bathrooms. The house was old-fashioned, with high ceilings, large square rooms, brick fireplaces, and dark wainscoting, but James's mother had had taste, and the place was well furnished. Now, James did not know what remained to him in the house which had lain seven days wholly submerged beneath the muddy water of the upper Perdido. When Bray rowed him through town, James Caskey could tell where his house was only by looking at his sister's house next door (which was two-storied) and by the brick chimney of the kitchen, which was higher than those of the parlors.

James, however, had given little thought to the contents of his house, though he loved every stick of his mother's furniture, loved everything that had belonged to her. He had to think of the mill, whose loss, whether total or only temporary, meant hardship for the

whole community. The Caskey mill, owned jointly by James and Mary-Love and run jointly by James and Mary-Love's son Oscar, employed three hundred and thirty-nine men and twenty-two women, white and colored, ranging in age from seven to eighty-one—these last a great-grandson and a great-grandfather who stenciled the Caskey trefoil onto the boards of the company's specialty woods: the pecan, oak, cypress, and cedar. Because these three hundred and sixty-one persons would suffer greatly if the mill could not be brought back quickly into operation, James Caskey had Bray row him over to the still submerged mill so he could see what, if anything, might be done.

James Caskey's rickety frame made him appear frail, a general impression intensified by his movements, which were habitually slow and deliberate and displayed (as far as was consonant with a body that tended to jerkiness) some amount of flaccid grace. He certainly had never spent much time in the Caskey forests, and it was suspected that he didn't know as much about trees as a Caskey ought to know. His disinclination to tramp about forests and have his boots muddied, his trousers ripped with briars, and his way impeded with rattlesnakes was well-known, but he was a splendid worker in the office, and no one in town could compose a better resolution or draft a subtler letter. When the town proposed incorporation to the state legislature, James Caskey represented Perdido before that assembly, and after a fine speech there it was universally wondered why the man had never gone into politics.

James's examination of the mill-yard showed the Caskey warehouses in deplorable condition. Even those that were closed were ruined, for the water-soaked wood had buckled and warped. The lumber in the open sheds had all floated away to God only knew where. Inventory appeared a complete loss. The offices were wrecked too, but James had had the sense to fill two wagons with records current and immediately past, and these had been taken to higher land. They lay now under hay in the barn belonging to a potato farmer, but the mill had lost all records of everything before the year 1895. Tom De-Bordenave was in a much worse fix however, for he

had opted to save lumber before records; the lumber was lost anyway, for the barn in which it had been stored had eventually washed away as well, and now he had no record of bills outstanding, of future orders, or even of addresses of his best Yankee customers.

After a couple of hours being rowed uselessly about his submerged mill and calling out commiserations to Tom DeBordenave, who was in another little green boat, looking over his adjoining property, James Caskey was taken back past his submerged house to the forest track that led to the Zion Grace Baptist Church. Bray, of course, had already told him of the strange appearance of the red-haired woman in the Osceola Hotel, and he had heard the same story from his nephew. James was more than a little curious to see her. No one in Perdido had talked about anything but the flood for so long that he was glad of the opportunity to hear about something that had nothing to do with water.

That Miss Elinor had remained the night at the Zion Grace Baptist Church he knew from Bray, because Bray had fetched another mattress from Annie Bell Driver's house. James Caskey hoped that Miss Elinor would be sitting out in front of the church when he walked past; that would save the subterfuge of seeking out Mary-Love or Sister or his daughter inside the church and bringing the conversation and the introductions gradually around to the rescued young woman.

Bray tied the little green boat to the exposed root of a tree at the edge of the floodwater—it had already subsided to such an extent that when they emerged on to dry land they were still within sight of Mary-Love's house on the edge of the town line. Mr. James and Bray walked rather quickly through the springy, damp forest.

After a few minutes of silence Bray, who was walking in one wagon track while Mr. James walked in the other, ventured the opinion that Mr. James would be better off "if he left that lady alone."

"Why you say that?" asked James curiously.

“I say that ‘cause I know what I say.”

James shrugged, and replied, “Bray, I don’t believe you know what you are talking about.”

“I do, Mr. James, I do!” cried Bray, but there was an end to the argument. Mr. James wasn’t going to lengthen it by demanding specifics of Bray, and Bray wasn’t going to volunteer any hard information on Miss Elinor for the simple reason that he hadn’t any; and he wasn’t going to tell any of his suspicions either, which were notably formless and might—if Miss Elinor proved to be nothing more than what she appeared to want to appear—reflect badly upon Bray.

After all the chilly floodwater that had passed beneath Bray’s little boat, the forest seemed warm and dry and safe. James Caskey walked along smiling, turning his head quickly when he heard quail call, trying to see them but not succeeding.

“That her,” said Bray in a hoarse whisper when they came within sight of the Zion Grace Church.

Elinor Dammert sat on the front steps of the church with James’s daughter Grace huddled in her lap—it was almost as if she had been waiting for him there and had secured Grace in order to facilitate their meeting.

Bray hurried on toward the Driver house, but James, thanking the colored man for his trouble that afternoon, went up to the church and introduced himself to Elinor Dammert.

“You’re visiting Perdido at a bad time,” he remarked. “We cain’t offer you but a poor sort of hospitality.”

Elinor smiled. “There are worse things than a little high water.”

“Is that child bothering you? Grace, are you bothering Miss Elinor?”

“She’s not,” said Elinor. “Grace likes me pretty well.”

Grace hugged Elinor's neck to show her father how much she liked the new young woman.

"Oscar told me you lost all your money in the flood."

"I did. It was in my case, along with my certificates and diplomas."

"That's a real shame. I blame Bray. But we can get you on the Hummingbird back to Montgomery, at least."

"Montgomery?"

"Isn't that where you come from?"

"Went to school there. Huntingdon. I come from Wade, up in Fayette County."

"Send you back to Wade, then," said James with a smile. "Doesn't Grace want to see her daddy?" he said, unfolding his arms with a jerk that might have put one in mind of a child's jumping jack.

"No!" cried Grace, holding more tightly still to Elinor.

"You must think I've got someplace to go," said Elinor over Grace's shoulder.

"Not Wade?"

"That's where my people are from. All my people are dead," said Elinor Dammert, squeezing the child in her arms.

"I'm sorry. What will you do, then?" James Caskey asked solicitously.

"I came to Perdido because I heard there was a place in the school. If there is one, then I'll stay and teach."

"You know who you should ask, don't you?" said Grace from the arms that encircled her.

"Who should she ask, Grace?" said James.

"You!" cried Grace. Then, turning to Elinor: "Daddy's head of the board."

“That’s right,” said James. “So you should be asking me.”

“That’s who I’ll ask then. I heard there was a vacancy.”

“There wasn’t,” said James, “at least not before the flood.”

“How do you mean?”

“Edna McGhee was teaching fourth grade—been teaching fourth grade for six years, I believe—but she told me night before last that she and Byrl were leaving town, that they weren’t waiting around for the next flood to come and sweep them all down to Pensacola on the back of a love seat. So if Edna and Byrl leave town like they say they are, we’ve got nobody to teach fourth grade.”

“Except me,” said Elinor. “I would be happy to teach fourth. But you ought to remember, Mr. Caskey, I’ve lost my certificates and my diploma.”

“Oh,” said James with a smile, “but that was our fault, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it, Grace?”

Grace nodded her head vigorously, and threw her arms around Elinor’s neck.

James stayed at the church for an hour more, talking only briefly with Mary-Love about the state of the mill, but speaking at great and evidently congenial length with Miss Elinor, who wouldn’t put poor Grace down. He took his leave—with considerable reluctance—only when Tom DeBordenave and Henry Turk sent a man after him; the three millowners needed to talk concertedly about what was to be done now. Mary-Love told Sister it was absolutely scandalous that when James finally did go away he consigned his daughter to the care of the redheaded stranger, while his sister-in-law and his niece had stood in plain sight! “Mama,” said Sister, “you look at Grace, she won’t leave Miss Elinor alone! Miss Elinor has got a friend for life!”

Mary-Love, who had exhibited no desire to become intimate with Miss Elinor the previous evening or earlier that morning, now could hardly be brought to speak to the young woman—and wouldn’t have allowed Sister to do so either, had not the desire for concrete

information regarding Miss Elinor's antecedents and intentions been of overwhelming moment. When Sister brought her mother the news (obtained in one corner of the church, and delivered in another) that James was going to try to get Miss Elinor a place in the school, Mary-Love sighed deeply, and sat down on the hard bench with the air and the motion of a fighter who has just had all the wind knocked out of him in a single cruel blow. "Oh, Sister," said Mary-Love in a low moaning voice, "I knew she would do it…"

"Do what, Mama?"

"Worm her way in. Bore her way in. Dig right down in the mud of Perdido until she couldn't be dragged out again by seventeen men pulling on a rope that was tied around her neck—and I just wish it were!"

"Mama," cried Sister, looking around to where Elinor sat—quite demurely—talking to Miz Driver and still holding Grace Caskey upon her lap, "you are being hard on her, and I don't think she deserves it!"

"Just wait, Sister," said Mary-Love, "just wait and tell me that again in six months."

That night—not late, for when there was so much to do during the daylight that could not be accomplished in darkness, everyone went to sleep early— Oscar Caskey and his uncle James lay together in the bed that was usually occupied by Annie Bell Driver and her insignificant spouse. The Driver house was crowded with men, colored and white, very well-off and very poor, very old and quite young (though the youngest remained with their mothers in the church), so that every chamber was filled with mattresses and snoring.

Two of Miz Driver's sons slept on the floor at the foot of their parents' bed breathing noisily through their mouths, so when Oscar raised himself on his elbow and spoke to his uncle it was in a whisper.

“What are you gone do about Miss Elinor?” Oscar asked. “Mama told me you spent the morning with her. The whole morning, Mama said.”

“Well, she’s a nice girl,” remarked James. “And I feel bad about what happened to her. Trapped in the Osceola, her bag gone, no money, no certificate, no job, no place to go. She is as bad off as anybody in this town—in fact, worse than most!”

“I know it,” said Oscar softly. “I cain’t understand why Mama took such a whole-cloth disliking to her. Makes things hard.”

“Mary-Love doesn’t want me to do anything,” James agreed, tapping a bony finger against Oscar’s pillow next to Oscar’s nose. “Mary-Love doesn’t want me to address another word in Miss Elinor’s direction.”

“But you are gone do something, aren’t you, James?”

“Of course, I am! I’m gone get her a job. She’s gone be teaching in September. In fact, she may have to start as soon as we get the school back open, because I don’t think Byrl and Edna McGhee are even gone try to clean up their house, though I don’t think there’s probably more than two feet of mud on their kitchen floor. If they go—and Edna’s got people in Tallahassee who’ll take her and Byrl in right now— then Miss Elinor can start at the school right away.”

“Well, that’s good,” said the younger man, and looked over his uncle’s shoulder at the rising moon through the window. “But where is she gone live? She cain’t go back to the Osceola—they charge two dollars a day. A fourth-grade teacher doesn’t make that kind of money—not two dollars a day and having to buy food, too.”

“I’ve already thought about it, Oscar,” said James. “And what I’ve decided is—she’s gone stay with Grace and me.”

“What?” Oscar exclaimed so loudly that the Driver boys paused in their snoring as if to hear more or perhaps in order to incorporate the exclamation into their dreams. “What?” Oscar repeated in a far softer voice when the boys’ snoring had resumed.

“When we get the house cleaned up, I mean,” said James. “Grace loves Miss Elinor to death, and hasn’t known her since yesterday morning.”

“She’s gone live with you!”

“We got room,” said Oscar. “There’s Grace, that loves her.”

“James, what about Genevieve? What you imagine Genevieve is gone say when she comes back from Nashville and sees Miss Elinor sitting on the front porch with Grace in her lap?”

James Caskey turned over, away from his nephew. He didn’t answer.

“What you gone say to Genevieve, James?” demanded Oscar in a whisper. “And for that matter, what you gone say to Mama?”

“Lord!” said James after a time, stretching his feet against the iron bars at the foot of the bed, “aren’t you tired, Oscar? Aren’t you worn out? I am. I got to get to sleep or I’m not gone be able to get up in the morning at all!”

The sun shone bright and hot all day Easter and for the next three days. The floodwaters evaporated or they ran down to the Gulf of Mexico or they sank into the sodden earth.

The inhabitants of Perdido came down from high ground into the town and slogged up to the doors of their homes to find that the mud had got inside, that their heaviest and best pieces of furniture had floated up to the ceiling, and later when the water receded, had been left in broken heaps on the floor. Mortar had washed out of brick foundations, and every board that had lain underwater was warped. Porches had collapsed. The rigid limbs of pigs and calves stuck out of the muck in everyone’s front yard. There were drowned chickens on the stairs. Machinery of all kinds was clogged with sludge, and though patient little colored girls were set to the task of cleaning, all the mud was never to be got out again. Gas tanks and oil drums had floated out of the mill storage yards and smashed through the windows of houses, as if on purpose to wreak the greatest damage

possible. Half the stained-glass windows of the churches had been broken. Hymnbooks in their racks on the backs of pews had become so saturated with water that they had, in their expansion, split the wood. The works of the new pipe organ at the Methodist church were filled with mud. There wasn't a single shop of Palafox Street that didn't lose its entire stock. And there wasn't a square foot of property in the entire town that didn't stink—of river mud and dead things and rotting clothing, rotting wood, and rotting food.

The National Guard and the Red Cross had arrived before the floodwaters had receded, bringing blankets and cans of pork and beans and newspapers and medicine to the encampments that surrounded the town. The National Guard remained a week longer than the Red Cross and assisted the mill workers in clearing away the largest pieces of wreckage. It was estimated by James Caskey, Tom De-Bordenave, and Henry Turk that the three mills combined had lost a million and a half board feet of pine—warped, washed down to the Gulf, or simply come to rest and rot in the submerged forest around Perdido.

The worst-hit portion of town was Baptist Bottom. Half the houses had been totally destroyed; the remainder were severely damaged. Those blacks who had had so little before the flood now possessed nothing at all. These unfortunate householders were the first assisted. Mary-Love and Sister and Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk spent all day at the Bethel Rest Baptist Church feeding colored children rice and peaches, when they might have been at home superintending the cleaning of their own houses.

The homes of the workers were water-damaged, but for the most part intact. The homes of the shopkeepers, dentists, and young lawyers had fared best, for they had been built on the highest ground in Perdido, and some had escaped with no more than a foot of water on the carpets—not enough even to upset the chairs.

The houses of the millowners, built so near the river, had suffered of course, but the waters there had not reached more than a few inches past the level of the second floor, and most of the household

belongings that had been stored upstairs were intact. However, James Caskey's single-story home seemed nearly a total loss. Because the house was built in a slight depression and stood nearer the river than any other house on the street, it had lain longer beneath the floodwaters than any other structure in town. It was the first to be inundated, the last to be dry.

The schoolhouses, which were on the river just south of the Osceola Hotel, had suffered considerable damage as well, and the remainder of the school year was canceled, though fully a month of classes remained. The children, thus unexpectedly released, had unexpected brooms and pails put into their hands, and they did their part to setting the school to rights. But, though Edna McGhee and her husband had indeed moved away from Perdido and were now sending postcards from Tallahassee with some regularity, Elinor hadn't yet been called upon to take her place. Under James Caskey's recommendation, Elinor had been unanimously accepted by the school board. It hadn't even been thought necessary to write off to Huntingdon College for a copy of her certification. After all, it had been lost in the flood, along with so many other of the young lady's belongings. The school board felt that it would be adding insult to injury for Perdido to demand that Elinor Dammert produce what Perdido had taken away.

What was discovered in the months following the flood was that not everything could be put to rights, no matter what amount of effort was expended in the attempt. Washing tins of food under cold running water, for instance, did not entirely guard against botulism —or so everyone had been warned by the Red Cross—and all the stocks of the two groceries and the fancy foods store had to be jettisoned; this at a time when there wasn't as much food as people were accustomed to. Great piles of warped lumber from the three yards were dragged into the cypress swamp in which the Blackwater River had its source five miles northeast of Perdido. It was left there to rot and be out of everyone's way, though the following autumn it was discovered that many of these logs and boards had been laboriously dragged back to Perdido in order to rebuild Baptist

Bottom, the houses of which, because of the warped boards, looked more crooked than ever before. Fine carpets had to be thrown out because they could not be cleaned of the stain of river mud. Books and documents and pictures had been severely water-stained— even those that had been above the high-water line were not unaffected— and only those that were necessary (such as deeds in the town hall and prescriptions at the druggist's) were retained.

But the flood wasn't all bad, they would say later. When it cut off the town's water supply for several days, the citizens of Perdido understood the inadequacy of their present system and quickly voted an expenditure of forty thousand dollars to build a new pumping station on the nearest two acres of land that hadn't been flooded. Because everyone's yard was torn up and most of the streets had been washed away, it seemed the appropriate time to install a modern sewage system—and so, with money borrowed from the owners of the three mills, new sewers were laid into the ground all over the town. Even Baptist Bottom was not forgotten in these improvements, and for the first time there were streetlamps to illuminate the tin roofs of the shacks at night.

Perdido was forgotten by all but the Baldwin County legislator who tried, unsuccessfully, to get loans in Montgomery, and by several firms in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania who had placed orders with one of the mill companies and now learned how late those orders would be delivered. But the effects of the flood remained a long while in Perdido, months and months after the waters had receded, even after the sewer lines had been laid and the new pumping station was drawing up the coldest and sweetest water that anyone in town had ever tasted. The stink of the flood never entirely went away, it seemed. Even after the slime had been swept out of the houses, the walls scrubbed down, new carpets laid, new furniture bought, new curtains hung; even after every ruined thing had been carted away and burned and the broken branches and rotting carcasses of dead animals had been washed out of the yards and grass had begun to grow again, Perdido would start up the stairs last thing at night and pause with its hand on the banister, and

beneath the jasmine and the roses on the front porch, beneath the leftover pungency of supper from the kitchen, and beneath the starch in its own collar—Perdido would smell the flood. It had seeped into the boards and beams and very bricks of the houses and buildings. Now and then, it would remind Perdido of what desolation there had been, and what desolation might very well come upon the town again.

CHAPTER 3
Water Oak

During the five days that Miss Elinor spent at the Zion Grace Church, she had made herself as useful as possible, keeping the children, doing a little cooking, cleaning the church, washing the bedclothes, and complaining not at all. She had won the admiration of everyone but Mary-Love, and Mary-Love's antipathy toward Miss Elinor was a subject of some remark. For lack of any better reason, it was ascribed to family pride—Mary-Love had seen what inroads Miss Elinor had made into the affection of Grace and the esteem of James Caskey, and possibly saw this as a dangerous disruptive element in her family. That, at any rate, was the least illogical possibility—though it was only a hypothesis; the real cause was probably something else altogether. No one thought to ask Mary-Love directly why she didn't like Miss Elinor, but, as it happened, she wouldn't have known what to answer. The truth was, she didn't know. It was, Mary-Love confusedly told herself, Miss Elinor's red hair—by which she meant: it was the way Miss Elinor looked, it was the way Miss Elinor talked, carried herself, picked up Grace, made friends of Miz Driver, and had even learned to distinguish among Roland, Oland, and Poland Driver—the female preacher's three insignificant sons—and who had ever done that before? Such energy expended in a strange community seemed to indicate a firm purpose at work—and what could Miss Elinor's purpose be?

"I am sorry for that child," said Mary-Love emphatically as she and Sister sat rocking on the front porch, peering through the screen of dead-looking camellias to James's house and watching for Elinor Dammert to appear at one of the windows. Mary-Love and Sister had been back in their house for nearly two weeks, and still the stink of the flood wasn't out of everything.

“What child, Mama?” Sister was embroidering a pillowcase with green and yellow thread. So much linen had been ruined!

“Little Grace Caskey, that’s what child! Your tiny cousin!”

“Why you feel sorry for Grace? She does fine as long as Genevieve stays away.”

“That’s what I mean,” said Mary-Love. “For all intents and purposes, James has got rid of that woman, I am thankful to say. James had no business being married in the first place. James was not cut out for marriage, and he should have known it as well as everybody else in this town knew it. You could have knocked the entire population of Perdido down with a feather—the same feather—when James Caskey came back here with a wife in a sleeping compartment. Sometimes I think James was smart, and signed a paper with Genevieve that said she should come to Perdido, get pregnant, leave him a baby, and then go away again forever. I wouldn’t be surprised if he signs a check every month to the liquor store in Nashville giving Genevieve an open account. An open account at a liquor store would keep Genevieve in Moose Paw, Saskatchewan!”

“Mama,” said Sister patiently, “I never ever heard of that place.” It was the habit of mother and daughter to maintain contradictory stances on any question: if Mary-Love were excited, then Sister remained calm. If Sister waxed indignant, then Mary-Love became conciliatory. The technique had developed over the course of many years, and now was so natural to them that they did it without thinking or willing it to be so.

“I made it up. But, Sister, James got rid of that woman—we don’t know how, we are just grateful that he did—and what does he do first chance he gets?”

“What?”

“He takes in another who’s just as bad!”

“Miss Elinor?” asked Sister in a voice which suggested she didn’t think the comparison was justified.

“You knew who I was talking about, Sister.”

It was hard to rock steadily on the front porch now that so many of the floorboards had been warped. Grady Henderson’s Fancy Goods Store had brought in a shipment of scented candles, which were bought up immediately. One of them burned now in a saucer on the floor between Mary-Love and Sister; its scent of vanilla did something to cover the rank-ness of the river soil that had been deposited all around the house. Bray and three men from the mill, which wasn’t yet back in operation, were systematically turning over all the dirt in the front yard, burying what had been laid down by the flood.

“Mama, your voice carries. Don’t let Miss Elinor hear you.”

“She won’t hear me unless she’s listening at the window,” replied Mary-Love, in an even louder voice. “And I wouldn’t be in the least surprised if she were!”

“What don’t you like about her?” asked Sister mildly. “I like her. I don’t see any reason not to like her, to tell you the truth, Mama.”

“I do. I see every reason in the world.” Mary-Love paused a moment, then suggested: “She has red hair.”

“Lots of people have red hair. That McCall boy I went to school with—you remember him?—who died at Verdun last year, he had red hair. You told me you liked him.”

“Oh, not like this woman, Sister! You ever see a color like hers? A color like Perdido mud? *I* never have. Besides, it’s not just the red hair.”

“What is it, then?”

“Where did she come from? Why did she come to Perdido? What does she want? How did she get James to ask her to come and live

with him? Has James ever asked any other young lady to sit at his table?"

"No, Mama, of course not. But Miss Elinor answered all those questions. Oscar told you all the answers. She came from Fayette County, and she came down here to teach. She heard there was an opening."

"There wasn't!"

"Then she was wrong, Mama, but there's an opening now. Miz McGhee has already sent three postcards from Tallahassee. That's what I heard."

"She made that opening."

"She didn't, Mama. How can you say that? The flood made that opening. High water caused that vacancy in the schoolroom!"

Mary-Love frowned and stood from her chair. "I haven't seen her pass a window in ten minutes. I wonder what she's doing in there? I'll bet she's plundering drawers!"

"She's helping clean up. James told me he had never seen anybody work as hard as she did in a house that wasn't her own."

Mary-Love sat down again and began plying her needle furiously. "You know what I think, Sister? I think she gone try to talk James into getting a divorce from Genevieve so she can take right over. That's why she's working so hard on that house— because she thinks it's gone be hers! A divorce! Can you even think of it, Sister?"

"Mama, you cain't stand Genevieve." "Well, I don't think James should get a divorce. I think Genevieve should die or go away forever. What does James need with a wife? James has got little Grace—:now is that child sweet? And he has got you and me and Oscar right next door. If James wanted, I would cut down every last one of these camellia bushes—they're practically dead now anyway—and he could see us every time he looked out the window. You know what kind of thing makes James happy? Buying silver. I have seen him do it. He sees a cake knife he doesn't have, his face shines. A fish slicer?—the

same thing, a shining face. Now, with all that, not to mention the mill to keep him busy and raising a little girl, what on earth does he need a wife for?"

It was a peculiar thing that no scandal was breathed in the length and width of Perdido over the fact that James Caskey, a well-off man who was mercifully separated from his wife, had invited a very pretty, unattached, and penniless young woman to share his home. The people of Perdido looked at it this way: here was a teacher come to town, whose money and certificates and clothing had been lost in the flood. She needed a place to stay until she got on her feet. James Caskey had this big house with at least two extra bedrooms in it and he had a little girl who could use a woman around to teach her manners, and with his wife off in Nashville doing nobody-dared-suggest-what, James himself needed somebody to talk to at supper. At the same time, everybody whistled and wondered what Genevieve would say, if only Genevieve knew. Elinor Dammert was smart; people could tell that just by looking at her. And Elinor Dammert probably had a temper; anybody with hair that color had a temper. But whether Elinor Dammert could stand up to Gene-vieve Caskey was a question charitable people hoped would never be put to the test.

The damage inflicted by the floodwaters had not been confined to animals and man-made objects. Flowers, shrubs, and trees had perished by the thousands, and the whole town had to be replanted. The most extensive damage had been to the Caskey grounds. All the trees had been uprooted. There were no more crape myrtles or roses, no more beds of day lilies, bearded irises, and King Alfreds, no more hedges of oleander and ligustrum, no more specimens of hawthorne or Japanese magnolia. The azaleas remained in their beds around the house, but they were dead. The camellias looked dead, but Bray said they had survived and Mary-Love accepted his opinion—at any rate, she did not demand that they be dug up. And certainly there was no more grass. The river had deposited over the ground half a foot or more of sopping red mud. Every day, Mary-Love and Sister watched

for blades of grass to sprout through the red soil, but every day they watched in vain.

The DeBordenave and Turk yards, which had suffered equally, had been dug up and reseeded, and the mud from the Perdido seemed to have brought with it a great number of nutrients, for their lawns sprang up sudden, green, and splendid, growing more lushly and certainly faster than ever before. But next door at James Caskey's, the yard was a flat expanse of dark mud. And at Mary-Love's place it was the same. After a few weeks the sun dried out that dark river soil and left a layer of gray sand two inches deep, with the reddish river soil packed beneath that. Sister picked up a fistful of this sand and let it drift through her fingers. Mixed in with the sand were the desiccated grass seeds that Bray broadcast every Friday afternoon. The destruction of the Caskey lawns was a subject for comment in Perdido, for the little plague of sterility was confined only to the Caskey lots. The DeBordenaves were not affected at all, the sand stopping in a straight line at the end of the Caskey property and the grass beginning immediately on the other side. The sand continued to the edge of Mary-Love's deeded property, at the town limit, where the pine forest began with its dense and prickly underbrush. By the end of June, Mary-Love and James had given up hope of ever growing grass again, and Mary-Love hired little Buster Sapp to come every morning at six-thirty and rake patterns in the sand with a leaf broom. By the end of the day most of Buster's careful work had been obliterated by footsteps of servants and visitors and the inhabitants of the houses, but Buster was always there first thing the following morning to renew the artificial symmetry and texture he gave to the injured Caskey demesne. The expanse of sand—somewhat more than two acres in all—was a depressing sight when one remembered the fine gardens and lawn that had surrounded the houses. Only Buster's rigorous patterning made it bearable. So despite talk, Buster worked even on Sundays (for which he was paid double). The households quickly grew accustomed to waking to the sound of rake on sand. Buster was a small, sleepy, infinitely patient child—who moved slowly about, producing an impromptu map of

concentric circles and elongated spirals. He plied his rake with a rhythm as inexorable as that of a pendulum. And perhaps it was that indication of time passing that made the sound of the rake on the sand so suggestive of death.

Each morning at six o'clock, before he began his work, Buster's sister fixed his breakfast in Mary-Love's kitchen. Buster was finished by ten, and at that time James Caskey's cook Roxie Welles made him a second breakfast. Then he took a pillow and went down to the mooring dock and took a nap until it was time for the midday meal. In the afternoon he ran errands for the two households. Sometimes he was paid by Mary-Love and sometimes by Miss Elinor—and sometimes he was inadvertently given money by both.

For several months Buster Sapp was practically the only line of communication between the two households, which formerly had been greatly intimate. Mary-Love Caskey didn't approve of Elinor Dammert's living with her brother-in-law and she didn't allow her daughter to approve of it either. James Caskey knew how his sister-in-law felt, but he was too pleased with Elinor's being in the house with him to argue with Mary-Love about the matter. After all, if he got into an argument with Mary-Love, Mary-Love would probably win it, and if Mary-Love won it, Elinor would have to go—and that was exactly what James Caskey did not want.

Elinor took care of him in the way that Genevieve might have if Genevieve had been a real wife. Elinor had supervised the cleaning and repair of the house. Each day in his absence she ordered about Roxie and Roxie's girl, Reta, and Roxie's boy, Escue. Reta spent all day on her knees, scrubbing the floors. Escue painted everything that could be attacked with a brush. Elinor and Roxie sat on the front porch and sewed new curtains for every room in the house. James gave Elinor three hundred dollars and told her to go out and buy what she needed; one day Elinor and Escue drove a wagon ten miles over to Atmore and came back with a load of new linens. Everything that had been touched by the floodwater she threw out. Sooner than

any other house in town, James Caskey's—which had been the worst damaged—was in the best repair.

Through means James never discovered, Elinor was able to save many of the fine pieces of furniture that had been thought lost to the floodwater. "I don't know what she did, Oscar," James said one morning at the mill, "but I got home last evening and there was Mama's sofa—the one I was all ready to throw out the back door—bright as bright could be. The rosewood was all polished and every last carved medallion back on it—and I know two of 'em broke off and floated out the front door—and a kind of blue upholstery exactly like I remember from when I was just little. I'd forgot all about it till I walked in and saw it! I could have sat down and cried it made me think so much of Mama!"

"James," said Oscar, "are you working Miss Elinor too hard, you think?"

"I think I am," replied James modestly, "but she doesn't. That house is in as good a shape as when Mama was living in it and Daddy was dead and couldn't mess it up. That's what that house looks like now! And Grace! Have you seen Grace of late?"

"I have," said Oscar, and they paused to speak to a man who was about to go out of the lumberyard in a wagon.

"But have you seen Grace's dresses?" James went on when the wagon was rolling out the front gate. "Miss Elinor doesn't think a thing in the world of sitting in the kitchen with Roxie and running up an outfit for Grace, while Grace is sitting under the table watching her do it! And with all this, Mary-Love is asking me to charge Miss Elinor room rent!"

"Mama doesn't know Miss Elinor, that's all," said Oscar.

"Mary-Love doesn't want to know her, that's what it is! Oscar, you know how I love your mama, and you know how your mama has always been right about everything, but I'll tell you something, she is wrong about Miss Elinor. Grace loves her, and I think the world of her! Do you know," said James in a low voice, tapping a bony finger

in the air, “that she has polished all my silver and wrapped it up in yellow felt?”

Oscar Caskey was frustrated. The thing he wanted most in the world was the thing he could not have— and that was the opportunity to learn more about Miss Elinor Dammert. The exigencies of his work at the mill required that he be either in the office or off somewhere in the forest by seven o’clock every morning. He returned home at noontime, but could spare only half an hour to eat, and had to drink his second glass of iced tea on the way back to work. In the evening he might not get home until six or seven o’clock, and by then he was so weary it was all he could do to sit up straight at the supper table. And sometimes in the evening his presence was required at a meeting, the purpose of which was to plan the restoration and improvement of Perdido after the disaster of the Easter flood. He could scarcely do more than wave at Miss Elinor on the front porch of his uncle’s house as he rode past in his automobile, or call out, “How you, Miss Elinor?” as he trudged up the steps of his own home, to where his mother held open the door for him and shut it and hooked it as soon as he got inside.

Mary-Love Caskey didn’t pretend to be able to control her son’s actions and emotions the way she could Sister’s. Mary-Love knew that Oscar liked that red-haired schoolteacher next door, and she also knew that it wasn’t her place to tell him that he ought not to like her. Oscar was now the man in the family, and that must stand for something. So Mary-Love was glad that despite the proximity of Oscar and Elinor there had been so little commerce between them. The flood had brought them together, but the aftermath of the flood was—at least for the time being—keeping them apart.

Early one Saturday morning, however—Saturday morning, the twenty-first of June, 1919, to be exact, when the sun had just crossed over from the air sign of Gemini into the water sign of Cancer—Oscar Caskey rose at his usual hour of five, then remembered that it was Saturday and he wouldn’t have to be at the lumberyard until eight o’clock. He would have turned over and tried to sleep another hour

then, but he was disturbed by a slight noise outside his window in the still morning. He got up and looked out. The dawn hadn't yet taken hold of the day. The sand below was a wide dark sea, showing only here and there what remained of Buster's work from the previous day. And now marring even more of the patterns was Elinor Dammert, coming up from the mooring dock. She held something tightly in one hand.

Oscar was curious. He wanted to know what had brought her out so early in the morning. He wanted to know what was hidden in her closed fist. He wanted the opportunity to speak to her without his mother or James or tiny Grace or any of the servants around. Hurriedly slipping into his pants and boots he clambered down the back stairs, then stood on the back porch and watched Elinor through the screen. Standing in the middle of the expanse of gray sand that sloped all the way down to the river, she was toeing a small hole in the earth.

The sky was pink and canary yellow in the east, but still dark blue—a blue more radiant than that morning's dawn—in the west. Birds called from across the river, but on this side only a single mockingbird, perched on James Caskey's kitchen roof, could be heard. From even so far away, Oscar could hear the water lapping against the pilings of the mooring dock. He pushed open the screen door.

Miss Elinor looked up. She dropped something out of her hand; it fell into the small hole at her feet. With the toe of her shoe, she covered the hole with sand.

"What are you doing, may I ask?" Oscar said, stepping outside and descending the steps. His voice sounded oddly hollow, breaking that early morning silence. It was so still that the soft shutting of the screen door behind him produced an echo against the side of James Caskey's house.

Miss Elinor moved several feet to her right and toed out another small hole. Oscar came nearer.

“I’ve got acorns,” she said.

“You planting them?” Oscar asked incredulously. “Nobody plants acorns. Where’d you get ‘em?”

“River washed ‘em down,” Elinor replied with a smile. “Mr. Oscar, you want to help me?”

“Acorns aren’t gone do anything here, Miss Elinor. Look at this yard. What do you see here? Do you see sand, sand, and no grass? That’s what I see. I think you are wasting your time planting acorns. Buster is gone come by in a while and rake ‘em all up anyway.”

“Buster doesn’t rake deep,” said Elinor. “I’ve told him I was going to plant trees out here. Mr. Oscar, if the grass won’t grow, then we’ve got to have shade at least. So I’m planting acorns.”

“I suppose those are live oak,” said Oscar, examining the four acorns that Elinor dropped into his hand. They were wet, as if indeed she had just scooped them out of the water. She hadn’t said, though, what she was doing down at the mooring dock at five o’clock in the morning; after all, she couldn’t have been waiting for the acorns to wash down the Perdido and into her hand, could she?

“They are not,” she said. “They are water oak.”

“How can you tell?”

“I know what water oak acorns look like. I know what they look like when they wash down the river.”

“And you think they’ll grow here?”

She nodded.

“I don’t know of any stand of water oak up the Perdido,” said Oscar after a pause, as if he were trying to recall one. This was a polite way of contradicting Miss Elinor, for in truth Oscar Caskey knew every tree in Baldwin, Escambia, and Monroe counties, and was perfectly certain that there were no water oak branches overhanging the upper Perdido.

“Must be there, though,” said Elinor as she dropped another acorn into the earth, “if they were washing downstream.”

“I tell you what,” said Oscar as he dug a hole with the heel of his boot and dropped in an acorn. “This afternoon I’ll get off work early and you and I will go out in the wagon.” He covered up the acorn.

“Go out where?” She reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out another handful of acorns. She dropped several into Oscar’s outstretched palm and held the rest of them herself. As he spoke she continued the planting.

“Out in the woods. You’re gone pick out the trees you like—anything up to twenty-five feet—and I’ll mark ‘em with a blue ribbon, and Monday morning I’ll send out some men to dig ‘em up and we’ll bring ‘em back here and put ‘em in. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. What do I hire men for, anyway? Even if these acorns were to grow—and there’s prettier trees than water oaks, Miss Elinor — it would take ‘em so long that you and I would be bent over before they provided enough shade to take off our hats.”

“You’re wrong, Mr. Oscar,” said Elinor Dammert, “and I’m not going to pick out any trees in the woods. But you come back here at three o’clock and I will have Escue’s wagon ready. We will go for that ride.”

Mary-Love didn’t like it a bit, and that evening after his return, Oscar hardly had time to wash his hands before supper was put on the table.

“What did you talk about?” Sister asked.

“About James and Grace and school. We talked about the flood. Just like everybody else in town.”

“Why were you so long?” asked Mary-Love. She thought that Oscar’s scandalous behavior shouldn’t be talked of at all, but her curiosity overcame her misgivings about sanctioning the episode with her questions.

“I took her out to the Sapps and we bought some cane juice. You know they got a three-year-old girl running that press now? She is so small that they have to lay her on her stomach on that old mule’s back and tie her on with a rope.”

“Those Sapps!” cried Sister. “I declare we are gone end up hiring every one of those nine children just to keep ‘em from getting worked to their deaths.”

“So,” said Mary-Love, “you went out to the Sapps and you came right back. That took you three hours and thirty-five minutes?”

“We stopped in and spoke to Miz Driver, that’s all, and Miz Driver gave us some of her early watermelon. We wouldn’t have stopped I think except that Oland and Poland—or it might have been Roland—ran out and stopped the wagon. Those boys think the world of Miss Elinor. You know that those three boys eat watermelon with pepper instead of salt? I had never even heard of that, but Miss Elinor had. Mama, Miss Elinor is smarter than you give her credit for.”

And next door, at the table, Miss Elinor told the same story for Grace and James Caskey.

“But you had a good time,” said James Caskey.

“Oh, yes,” said Miss Elinor, “Mr. Oscar was very good to me.”

“Well, as long as you had a good time,” said James Caskey, “that’s all that matters.”

Eight days after the planting of the water oak acorns, Elinor Dammert attended morning service in Perdido for the first time. Previously, after Sunday school, Elinor had returned home with Grace, who was thought too little to sit through a sermon. But suddenly Grace had gotten older or was better-behaved—or perhaps Elinor Dammert had a particular wish for wanting to go to church. At any rate, next to Elinor sat Oscar Caskey, and when they rose to sing hymns, he held the book open for her as she lifted little Grace in her arms.

Mary-Love didn't like it, but between stanzas Sister whispered, "Mama, you cain't expect her to hold Grace and the hymnbook too!"

When they all returned from church that morning, Buster Sapp was waiting on the front steps of James Caskey's house. He ran up to Miss Elinor, grabbed her hand, and dragged her around to the back.

When the others followed, wondering at Buster's even being awake at that hour of the morning and even more at his failure to finish his raking on one side of the house, they saw Miss Elinor standing near the back parlor windows. She was smiling broadly. Right beside her, wide-eyed and still astonished, Buster Sapp rocked back and forth on his haunches. With a quivering finger he pointed at a little foot-high oak sapling. The acorn from which it had sprung lay split and rotted and loosely covered with coarse gray sand. And as James Caskey and Mary-Love and Sister and Oscar looked on with astonishment equal to Buster's, the black child rose and rushed all over the yard, and pointed out seventeen more water oak saplings that had raised themselves overnight in the sterile sandy earth.

CHAPTER 4
The Junction

What was known for certain about Elinor Dammert's life in Perdido could be easily summed up: she had been plucked from the Osceola Hotel on Easter morning by Oscar Caskey and Bray Sugarwhite; she lived with James Caskey and took splendid care of his small daughter Grace; she was to teach fourth grade in the fall; and she was being courted by Oscar Caskey whose mother didn't like it one little bit.

But everything else was a mystery, and seemed likely to remain so. Elinor Dammert was not unfriendly—she always spoke on the street, had a memory for names, and was polite in all the stores— but she didn't go out of her way to join in the life of the community. In other words, she didn't gossip— about herself or about others. Nor did she do much that was out of the ordinary—except to live apparently without care that Genevieve Caskey was bound to return someday and raise holy hell that her place in James's household had been usurped; and to have raised enmity in Mary-Love Caskey, a kind if slightly domineering woman, who had never before been known to dislike anyone who wasn't a thief or a drunk.

Actually, it was thought that Miss Elinor didn't really take to life in Perdido. The common remark was that she looked peaked, almost as if she weren't used to the climate, though how that might be when she was from Fayette County, not all that far north, no one knew. Certainly during these summer months, Miss Elinor spent a great deal of time in the water, and the muscularity of her shoulders—a strange thing in an Alabama woman—was a frequently remarked upon fact. People also said that she looked as if she weren't getting enough to eat (or perhaps not enough of the right things), though since James kept an ample table and Roxie was one of the best cooks

in town, people didn't see how this explanation of Elinor's condition could apply.

Buster Sapp arrived at the Caskeys' one morning early, even before the sun was up. He had set out from his parents' home in the country and miscalculated the time needed for the journey into town. As he went around the back of the house, intending to nap for a bit on the back steps, he was startled to see someone standing on the mooring dock. It was Elinor Dammert, and her white shift gleamed in the light of the setting moon. She dived into the river. Buster ran down to the water's edge and watched her as she swam in easy strong strokes directly across to the other bank. The swift current didn't deflect her an inch. This astounded Buster, who knew with what difficulty strong-armed Bray paddled from one bank to the other.

Before she had quite reached the other side, Elinor turned, and raised her head above the water. "I see you, Buster Sapp!" she cried out. The swift water flowed strongly past her, but Miss Elinor seemed immovably anchored.

"I'm here, Miss El'nor!" Buster called back. He was already quite in awe of the woman, because of the water oaks she had planted. Buster, raking around their slender trunks each morning, noticed daily growth. Was that natural? His sister Ivey told him it was because the acorns had been planted at the dark of the moon, but even that seemed an insufficient explanation.

"You come in here with me and we'll swim down to the junction!"

"Current is too strong, Miss El'nor! And I don't know what's in that water at night! They was oncet a alligator up in the Blackwater Swamp—Ivey told me. She told me that alligator ate up three little baby girls and spit up their bones on a sandbar!"

Grinning, Miss Elinor rose up straight in the early morning air until Buster could see her white bare feet shining beneath the surface of the black water. Then, in a graceful easy motion and without bending she toppled sideways into the current and began to slip gracefully downstream.

Buster knew what the whirlpool was like at the confluence of the Perdido and the Blackwater no more than a quarter of a mile away. He feared that Miss Elinor would drown. Help couldn't come in time even if he called, however, so the black boy ran along the bank of the river, stumbling occasionally on the exposed roots of trees, following Miss Elinor's white shift glowing just below the surface of the water. As he scrambled through a little screening thicket of pin oaks and magnolias, his trouser leg caught on a thorn and he had to sit down and carefully free himself. Rushing on, he soon found himself in the empty field in back of the courthouse. Here before him was the junction, where the red water of the Perdido and the black water of the Blackwater met, fought, and then were both sucked into the swiftly revolving maelstrom at the center.

Behind him the town hall clock began to toll five o'clock. He turned and stared a moment at its green-illuminated face. Miss Elinor ought to have got this far by now—she had been swimming fast, and Buster had been waylaid in the pin oak thicket. But he didn't see her anywhere. Had she already been dragged down? Buster trembled. Then suddenly he saw her head bob above the surface of the water a dozen yards upstream. The water flowed swiftly around her motionless body as if she had snagged there, but the Perdido was deep and without snags in that place. Then, almost as if she had simply waited for Buster to find her, Miss Elinor resumed her downstream journey. Buster watched with perfect terror as she moved on and then was caught up in the circular motion of the junction proper. Absolutely still and straight, and a few inches below the surface, she went round and round in the whirlpool. Buster called out wildly: "Miss El'nor! Miss El'nor! You gone drown!"

The woman was being drawn in closer and closer to the center of the spinning vortex. She stretched out her arms before her, and her body began to blend itself into the curve of the maelstrom. Soon, Buster saw, her body had formed itself into a complete circle. She had taken hold of her own toes, and she formed a white frame around the black whirling hole of the downspout.

Suddenly the circle of white skin and cotton that was Elinor Dammert sank out of Buster's sight.

He was overwhelmed with the certainty that this woman he so respected was doomed. Ivey told him that something lived right at the bottom of that whirlpool, something which during the day buried itself in the sand, but at night dug itself out again and sat on the muddy riverbed and waited for animals to get pulled down the whirlpool. But what it liked best was people. If you ever got pulled down there, it grabbed you so tight that your arms got broken and you couldn't fight back. Then it licked the eyeballs right out of your head with its black tongue. Then it ate your whole head, and then it buried the rest of your body in the muck so that nobody would ever find out what became of you. It looked mostly like a frog, but it had the tail of an alligator, and that tail swept the riverbed constantly, keeping all the bodies buried so that none of them ever floated up to the surface. It had one red gill for Perdido water, and one black one for the Blackwater. If it got real hungry it came up on the land—once Ivey had seen its trail from the river-bank to the house in Baptist Bottom where a washerwoman's two-year-old boy had disappeared the night before, and nobody ever found out what became of that child. Whatever it was, whatever waited on the murky riverbed for unlucky swimmers, whatever crawled up the clayey banks on dark nights; whatever that thing was, Ivey had assured her brother, it had been there before Perdido was built, and would be there when Perdido was no more.

Buster was now standing on a small piece of clay riverbank that jutted into the river. What Buster couldn't see was that it had been undermined by the action of the current. Suddenly it gave way. Flailing and screeching, Buster Sapp was thrown into the water. He tried to scramble up the bank again, and could feel the hard clay beneath his feet, giving him hope of recovery, but suddenly the circular motion of the junction seemed to enlarge itself to the very banks of the rivers. Inexorably, Buster was pulled away from the achingly close safety of that bank and into the whirlpool. He tried

frantically to swim downstream, but he remained in the turning current.

As he was pulled beneath the surface of the water, he opened his eyes for a moment and saw distorted the green clock face on the town hall. He screamed, and muddy water filled his mouth.

A large pine branch was also caught up in the maelstrom, and he grasped it as a spar to keep him afloat; but the branch was no more anchored than he, and they simply spun along together. He managed to get his head above the surface for a moment and catch two breaths of air, then was sucked below again. He was closer now to the downspout, spinning around ever more quickly.

He let go of the pine branch suddenly, and leaped out of the water —or at least he performed the motion of leaping, for he succeeded only in initiating a tumbling motion below the surface of the water. He was not only going around and around, he was being tossed head over heels in a dizzying succession of somersaults—and being inexorably drawn nearer the center.

The current was so swift at that center, the whirlpool so pronounced, that there was a depression in the surface of the water more than a foot deep. Quite suddenly, Buster was there, at the top of the downspout that was the entrance to the watery hell below. He managed to get two gulps of air, and to open his eyes. The surface of the river was at a level above his eyes. He tried to scream, but at the moment that he drew in one last breath, he was sucked straight down toward the bottom.

The thing Ivey had warned him against grabbed him. Buster's arms were pinned to his sides with such force that the bones splintered inside them. His breath was squeezed out until none was left, and he braced for the coarse black tongue that would lick out his eyeballs. Unable to refrain, he opened his eyes, but so far beneath the surface he could see nothing at all. Then he felt a thick heavy coarseness press over his nose and mouth. As it licked up toward his

eyes, Buster Sapp slipped into a blackness that was deeper and darker and more merciful than the cold Perdido.

No trace of Buster was ever discovered, but no one expected it to be otherwise. Elinor Dammert, unable to sleep and up early, said she had seen Buster dive off the mooring pier into the Perdido. Unquestionably he had been swept down to the junction and drowned. So many persons had been drowned at the junction and their bodies never located, either in town or much farther down the river, that no one even thought of attempting to assure the bereaved Sapps that the corpse of their little boy might be recovered. “He had no business getting in that water by the light of the moon,” said his mother, Creola, and she took comfort in the eight children who remained to her.

After Buster’s disappearance, Mary-Love set Bray to poor Buster’s monotonous task. Bray so little liked it, thinking the job beneath his dignity, that he drove his common-law wife, Ivey, out to the Sapp cane field one day and requisitioned one of Ivey’s sisters, a ten-year-old called Zaddie. Zaddie took up residence in Baptist Bottom with her sister and brother-in-law and was presented with her unfortunate brother’s rake.

And however it was, whether her system became suddenly accustomed to the local climate, or whether Roxie Welles began to feed her better, Miss Elinor no longer looked peaked. Her face regained the healthy color it had had when she was rescued from the flooded hotel. Miss Elinor looked as if she were settling in.

The school year began on September 2. On that day Miss Elinor assumed charge of the fourth grade, and tiny Grace entered the first. And when that morning, after a large celebratory breakfast, James Caskey asked Miss Elinor if she and Grace didn’t want a ride to the school in his automobile, she thanked him but declined.

“You know how to get there, don’t you, walking?”

“Of course, I know,” Elinor replied, “but Grace and I won’t be walking.”

“Well,” said James Caskey, smiling at Roxie who was bringing in a plate of hot biscuits, “how do you intend to get there? Is Escue gone take you down there in the back of his wagon?”

“Grace and I are going in the boat,” announced Miss Elinor, and she looked at Grace, who grinned and nodded her head in excitement.

“A boat!” cried James Caskey.

“Bray’s boat,” said Miss Elinor. “I have his permission.”

James Caskey sat still and perplexed. “Miss Elinor,” he said at last, “you know you got to get past the junction in order to get from our mooring dock down to the school. How do you intend to do it?”

“I intend to paddle hard,” replied Miss Elinor im-perturbably.

“Let me remind you,” said James in a tone that seemed only mildly protesting considering the danger he perceived threatening his only child, “that poor little Buster Sapp drowned at the junction last summer.”

Miss Elinor laughed. “You are afraid for Grace, Mr. Caskey.”

“I’m not afraid, Daddy!”

“I know you’re not, darling, and of course I trust Miss Elinor, it’s just that the junction…well, you remember Buster, don’t you, child?”

“Course I remember Buster,” cried Grace, putting her hands petulantly on her hips. Then she looked sideways both at her father and at Miss Elinor, and added in a low voice, “Ivey says Buster got eaten up!”

“Ivey was trying to scare you, honey,” said James. “But what happened to Buster was that he drowned.”

“Mr. Caskey,” said Elinor, “my daddy ran a ferry across the Tombigbee River for thirty-two years. I used to paddle up that river every noon to bring him his dinner. And that was when I wasn’t any bigger than Grace.” She smiled. “If you’re worried, I’ll tie a rope

under Grace's arms, and make Zaddie run along the bank, holding on."

But James Caskey wouldn't allow Miss Elinor to take Grace with her. That morning Elinor Dammert paddled the boat alone. James and Grace, however, were standing below the junction in the field behind the town hall when Elinor came by, and they waved lustily and called. She waved back at them and shot past the junction with only a little quiver of her paddle in the water. She rowed over to the red clay bank and sank the paddle into the soft earth. James Caskey went over and lifted Grace into the boat. "You were right," he said, "and I was wrong."

"Let's go!" cried Miss Elinor, and pushed off. Grace squealed in delight and waved frantically to her father.

Next day a dozen early morning loafers had congregated in the field back of the town hall waiting for Miss Elinor and Grace to shoot past the junction in Bray Sugarwhite's little green boat. On Thursday, two dozen men and women were hanging out of the town hall windows, and everybody waved. Elinor Dammert was a crazy fool to do it and James Caskey was a crazy fool to allow his daughter to ride in that boat, because one day a whirlpool was going to swallow them both up and spit up splinters and bones onto the red clay bank. Yet in a week or two it didn't seem such a crazy sight; they still waved from the town hall windows, but no one predicted destruction for Miss Elinor and Grace anymore.

Zaddie Sapp was a quick child, quicker than Buster had ever been, and when she had finished raking the yards each morning she would sit in the kitchen with Roxie or with her sister Ivey and take up a morsel of sewing or a pan of unshelled peas. It didn't matter what it was, she just wanted to be doing something. Elinor took a liking to the child and showed her how to manage simple embroidery. Mary-Love roundly condemned this when she heard of it, for colored women, in Perdido's opinion, had no use for ornamental work. But Elinor gave Zaddie a basket of pillowcases, and Zaddie painstakingly

embroidered a floral border around each and every one of them. For this effort, Elinor rewarded her fifty cents apiece.

By this and many other such actions, Elinor won Zaddie Sapp's heart. Every afternoon at three o'clock, Zaddie sat on the mooring pier and waited for Miss Elinor and Grace to come paddling up.

"How are you?" Elinor asked Zaddie every, day, and every day Zaddie was thrilled by the question.

"I'm just fine," Zaddie replied invariably, and then told her everything that had happened in both Cas-key households that day.

In these fine September and October afternoons, Elinor would sit on the front porch of James Caskey's house, rocking in a chair and listening while Zaddie and Grace sat on the steps and read aloud out of a book. Though she was four years younger than Zaddie, Grace was much the better scholar and apt to be proud of her scholastic superiority, but Elinor always kept Grace in check. "Grace," Elinor would say, "if Zaddie had had your opportunities, she would be much farther along than you are now. How well do you think you would be able to read if you had spent three years of your life on the back of a mule going round and round a cane-grind?" Abashed, Grace would button her lip and hand the book sheepishly to Zaddie, who quivered with the sense of privilege at being defended by so august a being as Miss Elinor. Miss Elinor, Zaddie never tired of repeating, was the only person in Perdido—man or woman— who could paddle a boat right past the junction.

CHAPTER 5
Courtship

By September, the three sawmills of Perdido were back in operation, and the exigencies laid upon James and Oscar Caskey lessened. When Oscar saw that Miss Elinor sat on the front porch every afternoon from three-thirty until dark, he took to coming home earlier from the mill.

He would park his automobile on the street, get out, and start up the walk toward his own house, then turn aside after ten steps or so as if with sudden inspiration. He would walk across the yard toward James's house, obliterating some of Zaddie's careful work and speak first to the black girl, who with Grace beside her, was always to be found at Elinor's feet. "So, Zaddie, how much did the water oaks grow today?"

"Grew some, Mr. Oscar," she invariably replied.

Everyone in Perdido had heard of the unrelenting vigor of Elinor's trees, had passed by the houses to see them, and had talked of them to an extent that rendered them old news indeed. No one had any explanation for the extraordinarily rapid growth, and all that remained was for Zaddie every day to ascertain that the grove of trees had gained another inch or so in the night.

After a little exchange with Zaddie on the progress of the trees, Oscar would turn to his cousin Grace, and remark something like, "I heard at the barbershop this morning that you and your little friends tied up your teacher and threw her off the top of the school auditorium. Was this true?"

"No!" Grace would cry indignantly.

“How you, Miss Elinor?” Oscar asked then, turning to her as if he had come across the yard expressly to speak to Zaddie and Grace, and now that he had done so, was free to see who else was about. “How were your Indians today?”

Oscar referred to all the students of the grammar school as “Indians.”

“My Indians kept me hopping,” said Elinor with a smile. “It’s my boys, though. My girls would do anything for me. Take a seat, Mr. Oscar. You look tired on your feet.”

“I am, I am,” said Oscar, taking the rocking chair next to hers, quite as if she hadn’t made the same invitation, and he accepted it, every day for the past two weeks.

“Your mama,” said Elinor, “is peering at us through the camellia bushes.”

Oscar stood out of his chair and called out, “Hey, Mama!”

Mary-Love, discovered, stepped from behind the cover of camellias.

“Oscar, I thought that was you!” she called from the porch.

“Didn’t you see the car, Mama?” he called out. He looked down at Miss Elinor. “She saw the car,” he said, in a voice his mother couldn’t hear.

“Tell her to come over here and sit with us,” said Elinor.

“Mama! Miss Elinor says come over here and sit awhile!”

“Tell Miss Elinor thank you, but I’ve got peas to shell!”

“She doesn’t!” cried Zaddie indignantly to Grace. “I shelled ever’ one of them peas this morning!”

“Tell your mama,” said Elinor politely, though she had certainly heard Zaddie’s contention that Mary-Love’s excuse was empty, “that if she’ll come over here, Zaddie and I will help her with her shelling.”

“All right, Mama!” cried out Oscar, not bothering to perpetuate the deception by straining his voice. He sat down again. He smiled at Elinor. “Mama does not want me over here,” he remarked.

“Why not?” demanded Grace, as she watched Mary-Love disappear behind the camellias again.

“Because of me,” said Elinor.

“Because of you?” cried Grace, not even beginning to comprehend how anyone could object to Miss Elinor.

“Miss Mary-Love thinks Mr. Oscar should be sitting on her front porch talking to her, and not sitting on this front porch talking to you and me and Zaddie.”

“Then why doesn’t she come over here? We invited her.”

Oscar sighed. “Let it be, Grace.”

“Mr. Oscar,” said Zaddie, turning around, “I shelled them peas this morning.”

“I know it, Zaddie. Now you and Grace sit still for a while.”

Grace and Zaddie leaned their heads together and began whispering.

“Your boys are giving you trouble?” Oscar asked.

“They’ll settle down next month. Right now half of them are out with the cotton harvest and the other half wish they were. I can’t get them to wear shoes, and I have to check them for ringworm every morning before recess.”

“They listen to you, don’t they?”

“I make them listen,” laughed Elinor. “I tell them that if they don’t listen to me, I’m going to take them out in Bray’s boat and drop them off at the junction. That makes them sit up straight. But I don’t have any trouble with my girls.”

Miss Elinor had thirty-four students, eighteen boys and sixteen girls. Twenty lived in town and fourteen in the surrounding

countryside. Of the fourteen from the country, twelve had been kept home for the past few weeks to help with the harvest. The remaining two were little silent Indian girls whose mother and father operated five stills in the piney woods over on Little Turkey Creek; they rode into school each day on the back of a decrepit mule. Elinor taught her children arithmetic, geography, spelling, grammar, and Confederate history.

Every morning Roxie fixed Miss Elinor a lunch to take to school, but one morning Roxie was called away to help with a baby-birthing in Baptist Bottom, and nothing could be prepared. When Roxie did return, a little before noon, she packed the little wicker case and gave it to Zaddie to deliver to the teacher. To go to the school of the white children was a great adventure for Zaddie, and she approached the building with awe. The principal, Ruth Digman, showed her the way to Elinor's classroom and knocked on the door for her.

The child at the back of the room, whose duty it was to open the door when anyone knocked, rose and answered the summons; all the children turned around and stared at the black girl in the doorway. No one had ever before seen a colored child in the white school. Trembling, Zaddie went forward with Miss Elinor's lunch. The teacher thanked her, then introduced her to the class. "Boys and girls," said Miss Elinor, "this is Zaddie Sapp, who is exactly your age. If she went to school she'd be in the fourth grade too, and she'd be as smart as the smartest one of you sitting here. She is saving up her money to pay the tuition at the Colored Arts and Mechanics College up in Brewton, and I will give her a quarter this very minute to put in her bank."

Zaddie took the quarter and rushed headlong from the room. From that moment—if, indeed, she had not already signed herself over—she was Elinor Dammert's creature for life.

One day in October, home from the mill for lunch, Oscar learned quite accidentally from Ivey Sapp that his mother and his sister would be going to Pensacola on an overnight visit in order to get to a particular dressmaker early in the morning. Oscar quickly figured

out that Mary-Love hadn't mentioned her upcoming absence to him because she hadn't wanted him to take advantage of it by spending the time in the company of Elinor Dammert. Oscar stepped out on the back porch and called Zaddie over to him. The girl, who was sitting under one of the water oaks that had kept on growing even though it was fall, came directly over.

"Zaddie, you know where Miss Elinor teaches, don't you?"

"I been there," said Zaddie.

"Will you take her a note for me? I'll give you a quarter to do it, Zaddie."

"I'll take it, Mr. Oscar," said the black girl eagerly. She would gladly have done it only for the chance to see the classroomful of white children again. Zaddie knew secretly that she could read better than half of them.

Oscar went back inside and wrote out a note at the kitchen table. He folded the note, took it out to Zaddie, and then after saying goodbye to his mother and sister he returned to the mill.

Late that afternoon, Mary-Love and Sister took off for Pensacola in the Torpedo roadster driven by Bray. Bray had been taught to drive the family's two automobiles, and more and more his position in the Caskey household was that of chauffeur. Mary-Love left her son a note suggesting that the trip had been made on the spur of the moment and telling him that supper had been left covered up for him on the kitchen table. Oscar ignored the note and the supper. He ate next door, and then took Miss Elinor and Grace to see The Ghost of Rosie Taylor at the Ritz Theater. After the flood the Ritz had reopened with scarlet upholstery and a new rosewood piano.

Later, when Grace had been put to bed, Miss Elinor and Oscar took a little walk down to the river. They sat on the mooring dock looking at the moon and stayed there until the town hall clock tolled midnight. Oscar declared that he hadn't been up that late since he tried to save the Caskey houses from the rising floodwater.

After that, Zaddie had a new job—she was a messenger. Every day she delivered to Miss Elinor the note that Mr. Oscar had written on the kitchen table directly after his noontime meal. Miss Elinor would read the note and write another in reply. Zaddie would take this note to the mill and walk straight into Mr. Oscar's office. Everybody in the school and everybody in the mill knew what Zaddie was doing, who had written the notes, and to whom they were directed.

Zaddie began to get to know Miss Elinor's students by name, and once, when she got there just at recess, she had even jumped rope and was able to teach the little white girls a rhyme they had never heard before.

Elinor Trimble Toe, she's a good fisherman

She catches fish and puts them in a pan

Some fry up and some fry down

Wire and bar and limber lock

Clock fell down and mouse ran round

To my dying grandma's house

With the old dirty dishrag in her mouth

Zaddie was proud of her daily errands, and didn't care a bit if Miss Mary-Love wouldn't speak to her anymore because of her services in the courtship of Miss Elinor and Mr. Oscar.

Because their big meal of the day was at noon and supper consisted of leftovers, Mary-Love found it difficult to complain when Oscar said he was going over to eat at James's where the food was hot. "You are bothering James," Mary-Love ventured to object, when she could refrain from objection no longer. "You are running up his food bill."

Oscar shrugged and replied only, "Mama, James eats dinner with us over here every day and you don't charge him a penny. He can afford to have me for supper once in a while."

"Every night!"

“He asks you and Sister to come too.”

“It would drive poor Roxie into the ground if all of us went over there all the time.”

“No, it wouldn’t. Roxie doesn’t have to cook during the day. And she told me she didn’t see why you and Sister ate cold food when you could have hot.”

Mary-Love wouldn’t reply, for she wouldn’t bring herself to admit that she refused to sit at the same table with Elinor Dammert. War, it should be understood, remained officially undeclared. Sister wasn’t allowed to go next door either, and at home she just picked at her cold plate and wished she knew what they were talking about over at James’s.

No mother and daughter in Perdido were closer than Mary-Love Caskey and Sister, but it was not to be supposed that either told the other everything she thought or knew. In fact, each of them liked to keep little secrets from the other, secrets which could be sprung at some opportune moment to produce a grand effect—rather in the manner of a little boy tossing lighted firecrackers beneath his sister’s bed while she napped on a hot summer afternoon.

What Sister was holding back just now was not exactly a secret so much as it was an opinion, and that opinion had to do with Elinor Dammert. It was Sister’s belief that Elinor was a powerful young woman, and that the power she wielded was exactly the sort to which Mary-Love herself had become accustomed. Elinor Dammert put things in place. She set things up. She set things right. She picked up people and she put them down again where she wanted them as a child might arrange the figures in a wooden Noah’s ark. Sister even had a mental image of James Caskey as a wooden figure. In her mind he was on a round base and a single stem represented his legs. Grace was a much smaller such figure. Zaddie was painted black and Oscar had the biggest smile. And Elinor Dammert, in Sister’s imaginings, threw her arms about the waists of those figures and lifted them up

and carried them where she wanted them to be and put them down again. The figures wobbled a little, but they stayed in place.

Mary-Love, by contrast, wheedled. She set up psychological stratagems by which her will was accomplished. Elinor was more powerful of the two, Sister suspected. Mary-Love only sometimes seemed so, because Elinor was holding back. While it was perfectly within Elinor's power to pick Oscar up and put him where she wanted him, she wanted Oscar to come to her of his own accord. But it was well within Elinor's capacity to knock over the wooden figure that was Mary-Love Caskey and roll her in tight circles until Mary-Love grew nauseated. Elinor was toying with Mary-Love, perpetuating Mary-Love's blindness to her own inferiority, perhaps wishing to test whether Oscar were capable of overcoming his mother without assistance. This opinion is what Sister was keeping from her mother, only waiting for the right moment to spring it.

One evening, a few days before Thanksgiving, Sister had a headache. Mary-Love had been carrying on about Miss Elinor all afternoon long, and that was a subject Sister thought she had heard enough of, especially as she considered that her mother's every pronouncement on that subject was jaundiced and inaccurate. As they sat together at the kitchen table eating leftover pork chops and corn, Mary-Love picked up where she had left off.

"I don't know what we are gone do about Thanksgiving."

"What do you mean, Mama?" said Sister wearily, slicing some fat off the chop.

"Well, we'll have it here, of course, and James and Grace are gone come, but what, I want to know, is James gone do about that woman?" Mary-Love Caskey couldn't be brought to say "Miss Elinor" aloud, but always called her "that woman"; this was sometimes confusing since she had always used that epithet for Genevieve Caskey as well.

Sister didn't answer, but she was so in the habit of responding to every remark her mother made that her very silence said something.

“Well, Sister?”

“Have you talked to James?” asked Sister. “Have you invited him directly?”

“Of course not! Why should I? Where else would they go for Thanksgiving?”

“James expects for you to invite Miss Elinor.”

“I won’t do it! Did he tell you that?”

“Yes,” replied Sister. “He said he expects you to walk across the yard and extend a personal invitation to Miss Elinor to have Thanksgiving dinner over here.”

“I won’t do it! That woman has not stepped foot one in this house, and I don’t intend to open the door for her now!”

“Then James says that he and Grace and Miss Elinor will have Thanksgiving dinner over there, and they’ll invite you and if you don’t want to come that’s your business.”

“Sister, why are you delivering this ultimatum? Is there another word for it?” she demanded rhetorically. Then as if perhaps Sister had not taken the question as it was meant, Mary-Love answered it herself. “No,” she said firmly, “there is not. It is an ultimatum.”

“James told me to say that. He told me this afternoon.”

“Sister,” cried Mary-Love in an extremity of annoyance, “do you believe this?” She ran to the kitchen window and looked out. The dining room of James’s house was lighted and she could see Miss Elinor through the window serving something onto Grace’s plate.

“Mama,” said Sister, whose headache was worse, “everybody in town thinks you are crazy out of your mind for not taking Miss Elinor to your heart. Everybody in town thinks the world of her.”

“I don’t!”

“Everybody but you, Mama.”

“Bray doesn’t!”

“Mama, I’m gone tell you something—”

“What?”

“Mama, I think you better start liking Miss Elinor.”

“Why is that, Sister?”

“Because Oscar is gone end up married to her.”

Mary-Love drew back from the window with a deep breath.

“I would be surprised,” continued Sister unmercifully, “if he has not already asked her.”

In fact, Oscar was circuitously asking that question at the very moment that Miss Elinor was spooning out English peas onto Grace’s plate. He said, “Miss Elinor, you know what?”

“What?” said Miss Elinor.

“I’ve been thinking about Zaddie.”

“You are running that girl to death!” said James at the head of the table, laughing. With Elinor there every night, and Oscar there most, James felt a little of what he imagined it might feel like to have a real family.

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Oscar.

“Zaddie has got more money than any other little girl in Perdido, white or colored.” Miss Elinor sat up straight, and cut into her ham. “Every time you see her coming, Oscar, you give her a quarter. And I do, too.”

“But her legs are tired,” said Oscar.

“What do you expect Elinor to do about Zaddie’s poor old legs?” asked James.

Zaddie, who had been listening to this conversation from the kitchen, appeared in the doorway and lifted her skirt to show that her legs were not worn down at all.

“Miz Digman will not let me put a telephone in my classroom, Oscar. If you continue to send me notes, then you will have to have someone to deliver them.”

“My legs are fine,” began Zaddie, but Roxie grabbed her by the skirt and dragged her back into the kitchen.

“White folks don’t like to look at a little colored girl when they are eating,” said Roxie sententiously, “unless she is bringing in a plate of something hot.” The door of the kitchen was pushed shut and Zaddie, for a time, heard no more.

“But what if we were married?” said Oscar. “Then I wouldn’t have to send you notes.”

Elinor looked up. Then she looked at James Caskey. “Mr. James,” said Elinor, “I think Oscar is making a proposal of marriage.”

“Are you gone accept him?” said James, with every indication of pleasure in his face.

“What do you think, Grace? Should I get married to your cousin Oscar?”

“No!” cried Grace, with distress written all over her countenance.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want you to leave!”

“Well, where would I go?” She looked up at Oscar. “Oscar, if I married you, would you take me away?”

“I’m not ever gone leave Perdido, Miss Elinor!”

“I mean out of this house, Oscar. Where do you propose that we would live?”

“I don’t know,” said Oscar after a moment. “It only just occurred to me this minute—while James was talking about not getting a letter from Genevieve— that I ought to be married myself. And I looked up and there you were, just sitting there not married. I really haven’t had time to consider everything. I have not yet bought a ring, Miss

Elinor, so you needn't ask me to produce one. I couldn't do it even if you held a knife to my throat and demanded it."

Grace picked up her knife and waved it in the air as if to tempt Elinor to put it to just such a use. Her father spoke Grace's thoughts.

"Oscar," said his uncle, "I don't hardly think it would be right for you to take Miss Elinor away from Grace and me."

Oscar turned in his chair and peered out across the yard at the lighted kitchen of his own home. He could see his mother standing in the window, looking out at them.

"I don't think Mama's gone be any too pleased either, when it comes down to it."

"Oscar," said Elinor, "Miss Mary-Love is not pleased when you have anything to do with me. She will certainly not be looking forward to your walking me up a church aisle."

"Elinor," cried James Caskey, "haven't you ever been to a wedding? In a wedding, the groom is standing at the front, and the bride and her father come down the aisle. You say your daddy is dead, I guess I'll have to take his place."

"Mr. James, please remember I have not said yes to Oscar!"

"Don't say yes!" cried Grace. "*I* want to marry you!"

"Darling," said Elinor with a smile to the child, "if girls married girls, then I'd marry you. But girls have to marry boys."

Oscar grinned and waved to his mother. Mary-Love disappeared from the window.

"Oscar," said Elinor, "I guess you and I will have to have a wedding, since I'm not allowed to marry Grace. But I want you to know right now, I'd rather have Grace."

Grace lowered her head poutingly onto her fists and wouldn't look higher than the edge of her plate.

Later that night Oscar told Sister of his engagement and Sister told Mary-Love. Mary-Love shut the door of her room and didn't come out again for three days. She feigned a nebulous indisposition of her bowels. Sister had to make all the preparations for Thanksgiving dinner, and that included inviting James and Grace and Miss Elinor to join them.

On the holiday morning Mary-Love looked wan and sad, as if she had just heard not only that her favorite cousin had died, but that he hadn't left her any money. She opened the door for James and Grace and Miss Elinor. It was the first time Elinor Dam-mert had entered the house. "Sister tells me you and Oscar are going to be married," Mary-Love said.

"Oscar didn't tell you?" asked James.

"Sister told me," said Mary-Love.

"Sister was right," said Elinor, unabashed. "Oscar and I are getting married. He was afraid that he was going to wear down Zaddie's legs sending me so many notes. Married people don't have to send notes."

"Zaddie," said Mary-Love, "might have better things to do than traipse around town delivering notes. Zaddie might do a little something or other around the house. I wonder why we pay her at all. I wonder whether Zaddie wouldn't appear to better advantage on the back of Creola Sapp's old mule." When she was distressed, Mary-Love's speech tended toward the emphatic.

There was no triumph in Miss Elinor's demeanor at Thanksgiving dinner. Neither did she quail beneath Mary-Love's baleful eye. She seemed perfectly at her ease, and actually laughed aloud at a joke that James told Sister.

For dessert there were two cakes, one chocolate and one coconut, and three pies: Boston cream, pecan, and mincemeat. Sister and Miss Elinor cut them up and served out slices.

Mary-Love got hers and said, “Sister says no date has been set for the wedding.”

“That’s right,” said James. “Of course, everybody wanted to talk over the plans with you, Mary-Love.”

“Elinor’s family should make all the decisions,” said Mary-Love.

“All my family are dead,” said Elinor. Everyone at the table looked at Elinor in great surprise. No one but James had heard this before, and he had forgotten it. Everyone had supposed that she had many relatives still in and around Wade.

“All of them?” asked Sister.

“I’m the last one.”

“Then, Mama,” said Oscar, “you’re gone have to help us.”

“First thing to do,““said Mary-Love quickly, “is to set the date.”

“All right, Mama,” said Oscar eagerly. During the course of the meal, Mary-Love had addressed several remarks to Miss Elinor, but none to her own son. Once when Oscar asked his mother a question she pretended not to have heard him and didn’t answer.

“One year from today,” said Mary-Love.

Miss Elinor stopped directly behind Mary-Love, holding a plate of pie intended for Grace who was vainly reaching for it. Elinor looked steadily at Oscar but said nothing.

“Mama,” cried Oscar, “that’s a long time away! Elinor and I were thinking more like maybe February. You’re talking—”

“Miss Elinor, you and Oscar don’t have anyplace to live, do you?”

Elinor finally came around with the pie and set it before Grace. “No, ma’am,” she said, “not yet. But I think it will be easy enough to find something.”

“Not something suitable,” said Mary-Love, staring straight in front of her. “Not something that would really do. If you got married in February, you’d have to live here with Sister and me.”

“No!” cried Grace. “Miss Elinor said—”

“Hush, child!” cried Sister in a low voice.

“I’ve invited them to live with me, Mary-Love,” said James.

“James, you have less room than I have. And it’s not right for newlyweds to share. Newlyweds need time to be alone together.”

There was an iciness in Mary-Love’s voice that contradicted the benignity of her words.

“Well, Mama, waiting a year doesn’t solve any of those problems,” said Oscar. “We’d still have to go out looking for a place to live.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” said Mary-Love quickly, looking at her son for the first time since the meal had begun. Oscar blushed and glanced away. Elinor had resumed her place at the table and regarded her future husband in silence.

“I’ve already decided what to give you as a wedding gift.”

“What?” said Oscar, looking up.

“I’m building you a house,” said Mary-Love, “right here next door to us, between this house and the town line.” She went on quickly, before anyone had the opportunity to express surprise in words. “But even if they start tomorrow—and they won’t, because I haven’t mentioned this to anybody—it won’t be done before April or May, and then we have to get it furnished. Sister and I will take care of that — Miss Elinor, you won’t have to do a thing.”

Miss Elinor made no reply.

“And when the house is done we can plan the wedding. That’ll take another couple of months. Oscar is my only boy, and I’m going to see that this thing is done right. Oscar?” she said, demanding his approval of the plan without objection.

Oscar turned and looked at Elinor Dammert. She said nothing at all, made no motion of her eyes, did not alter her expression. He received no clue as to what she thought his answer ought to be—and

it was his masculine opacity that prevented him from understanding that no clue was a very large clue indeed.

“Mama, does it have to be a whole year?” he asked at last.

“Yes,” said Mary-Love.

He then nodded acquiescence.

“Miss Elinor?” said Mary-Love.

“Whatever Oscar wants,” said Miss Elinor, putting a bite of coconut cake into her mouth.

CHAPTER 6
Oscar's Retaliation

Winters were mild in Perdido, but there was almost always a cold snap that lasted about a week late in January. Invariably some old colored woman in the country whose ramshackle house had walls made mostly of layers of newspaper would succumb and be found dead by her great-grandchildren who had come to gather her last pecans. The wives and daughters of the millowners would have a few days in which to show off their fur coats. Pipes burst everywhere, and everyone would sit in the kitchen by the stove. But with this single week as an exception, it was possible to sit out on the front porch all year long. And the weather was never so cold that Miss Elinor did not row Bray's little green boat to school. It was a common remark that Miss Elinor didn't feel the cold of that river anymore than did the fish that swam in it.

During that winter of 1920, Elinor's first in Perdido, the pact between Mary-Love and Oscar became known all over town; and it was a bargain that was seen in its true light. In exchange for Oscar's postponing the wedding for a year (during which time Mary-Love doubtless hoped that the engagement would be severed), she would build her son a fine house next door to her own. Supposing she got her wish and Miss Elinor went back to wherever it was that Miss Elinor came from, Mary-Love would retain her unmarried son, and her only problem would be what to do with the house. But perhaps, it was conjectured by those who liked to think about contingencies, she would move into it herself.

What Miss Elinor thought of the agreement no one ever learned. Elinor did not complain, though Christmas passed, and the new year came on, and nothing whatever had been done. There were no plans to be looked at. There wasn't a post in the ground or a building

permit to tack upon that nonexistent post or contractors' agreements or strings pegged into the sandy earth. Mary-Love dallied throughout the winter, and whenever Oscar brought the subject up, she would cry, "Oh, Oscar, it's gone be the prettiest house in town!" and then in the next breath propound some excuse that took her out of the room.

In the spring of 1920 again came the rains, but they weren't as severe as the year before. Everyone was nervous, and looked askance at the rivers every time they came within sight of them—which, considering the geography of Perdido, was frequently enough—and it became a habit to ask Miss Elinor what she thought about the matter. After all, she paddled down the Perdido every day. Even on Saturday and Sunday, when she didn't have to teach, she'd row to church, with Oscar sitting idly and very much contented in the front of the boat.

If someone in his Sunday school class twitted him on his allowing Miss Elinor to do all that work, he'd reply only, "Lord, you think I've got the strength to get that boat past the junction? I have been thinking of hiring Elinor to go up the Blackwater and knock me down some cypress. She said she'd do it if I hired her a little boy to help her bring 'em all back to town."

Miss Elinor, who saw the river more closely than anyone, ought to know if a flood was imminent. Miss Elinor was reassuring: there would be no flood this year. How could she tell? By the way sticks floated down to the junction, and by what kinds of sticks floated down. By how quickly the whirlpool went around and what dead animals were sucked down to the riverbed. By the color of the Perdido mud— and no one before had ever thought that the Perdido mud changed color, but Miss Elinor assured them that it did indeed. By alterations in sandbars and eddies and how much clay was washed away along the banks—alterations people who lived in Perdido all their lives couldn't even see, much less interpret. And because Miss Elinor said so, everybody came to believe that there wasn't going to be a flood this year.

However, this didn't mean that there wasn't any rain. There was plenty of it. During the blooming of the azaleas, from late February into March, there were only light sprinklings, so that the blooms all died natural deaths upon their branches. When it came time for the roses to bloom, there were heavier rains, and water beat into the ground all around them.

If it would start to rain during school hours, Miss Elinor would send her children to raise the windows high. "Smell that rain!" Miss Elinor would cry, and the children filled their lungs with the water-sodden air. If she was at home, Miss Elinor sat on the front porch and pulled her chair up close to the steps. Zaddie and Grace stood on either side of her and watched as if hypnotized as the rainwater poured off the eaveless roof in a sheer curtain, splashing on the steps and the porch railing and soaking their feet and the hems of their dresses. Zaddie and Grace would have pulled back, but Miss Elinor reassured them: "It'll dry. Don't worry, nothing dries faster than rainwater! It's the sweetest water there is!" And she would lean forward and catch water in her cupped hands as it poured off the roof and hold it out for Grace and Zaddie to lap up like obedient dogs.

Oscar felt guilty not only for having given in to his mother, but because Elinor wouldn't say to him that he had done wrong. The courtship continued as before, with this exception: whenever the subject of Mary-Love's promised wedding gift or the date of the ceremony was brought up, Elinor was obstinately silent and could not be brought to respond to Oscar's interrogatories with more than a grudging yes or a sullen no.

Oscar was determined to show Elinor that he wasn't weak, that he could stand up to his mother. Of course he had made his bargain, and he had to stick to that, but there were to be no more bargains or changes; there would not be even a week's delay in the wedding. And then there was the great question of the house. He told Mary-Love, "Mama, you are putting off."

"I am not! Putting off about what?"

“About this house. You won’t see to it because you don’t want Elinor and me to get married.”

Mary-Love was silent. She couldn’t bring herself to speak so great a lie as a denial of that accusation would have been.

“Well, Mama, let me tell you,” Oscar went on, “Elinor and I are going to be married the Saturday after Thanksgiving whether there is a house there or not. And if there is no house, then we’re going to go live somewhere else. And ‘somewhere else’ may be in Perdido and it may not be…”

Mary-Love was persuaded by this single speech. She knew her son would do what he said, just as she was convinced he would keep the bargain he had made with her. Though the weather was still cold, she went to Mobile the next day and talked to some architects. One of these men came to Perdido the following Monday and looked at the lot and had further discussion with Mary-Love about what kind of house she had in mind. Construction on the house was begun the second week in March.

It was to be built on the far side of Mary-Love’s house, on the edge of the sandy lot next to the town line. In fact, all the windows on the west side of the house would face directly into the wall of pine and hemlock that demarcated the edge of the Caskey property. It was set back farther from the road than Mary-Love’s house, but since the Perdido curved northward just at that point, the houses were equidistant from the water. In order to begin building, six of Miss Elinor’s trees had to be hewn down. These six trees were already of sufficient girth to be hauled away to the mill; there they were sliced into narrow planks, which eventually were used for the latticework on the back of the new house. In the whole business, Mary-Love’s sole consolation was the destruction of these six of Elinor’s trees.

Day after day the building went on no more than two hundred feet from where Elinor sat on the front porch of James Caskey’s house. If she had stood and leaned forward only a little she might have seen the new house rising, but Elinor would not go to so much trouble as

that. Zaddie, at her feet, said, “Miss El’nor, why don’t you go and look at your new house?”

“Miss Mary-Love is building that house,” said Elinor.

“But it’s for you!” cried Grace, who had only lately grown accustomed to the notion that Elinor would be leaving. She had secretly formed a dim little plan to run away from home the day after Elinor married and send back a note that she would return only on the condition that she be adopted by Elinor.

“When that house is finished and belongs to Oscar and me,” said Elinor, “there’ll be time enough for me to go through and see what the rooms are like.”

Oscar knew that Elinor hadn’t been in the house, although by the first of May you could walk right up to the second floor. It was to be the biggest and finest house in Perdido, and he delighted in describing it to her; he ticked off its amenities and sketched diagrams of its layout as if it were a carved marble tomb on the other side of the world that he doubted she would ever visit rather than the house being constructed next door but one and which was intended for her own habitation. Elinor listened patiently to all his raptures, and when he had finished said merely, “It sounds as if it’s going to be very nice, Oscar. I know you can hardly wait to be in it.”

“But what about you! Mama is building this house as much for you as for me, Elinor!”

“Ohhh!” said Elinor, “I couldn’t begin to think about that till the Saturday after Thanksgiving.”

After one too many conversations just such as this, Oscar went to Sister and said, “Sister, Elinor thinks I’m gone back out. She thinks I’m gone let Mama trick me again—you know Mama tricked me, don’t you?”

“Elinor is just mad,” said Sister. “Elinor is just disappointed you weren’t smarter.”

“I wasn’t prepared!” Oscar protested. “Mama tricked me at the dinner table!”

“Men s’posed to be smarter than women,” said Sister.

“Nobody in Perdido has ever said that within my hearing,” said Oscar. “And, Sister, I don’t believe for one minute that you mean it!”

“No,” said Sister after a moment, “I don’t mean it. Listen to me, Oscar.” In her voice was a tone Oscar had never heard his sister employ before. They were in Sister’s room, and Sister motioned for Oscar to seat himself. He did so, in a chair near the window; he could see the river and he could see Elinor’s trees.

“Oscar, Elinor is biding her time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Elinor is waiting to see if you are gone act right.”

“Sister, I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“If you would stop and think,” said Sister in an exasperated voice, “you would know. The reason that Elinor has not said anything is that she wants to play fair.”

“Play fair?” Oscar echoed.

“Oscar, don’t you think that if Miss Elinor had put her foot down at the beginning you and she would be married this minute? Don’t you see that that house next door would be finished and you would be living in it?”

Oscar considered this a moment and then nodded his head in agreement.

“Oscar, you are dense—”

“I know it!” he exclaimed, and he meant it.

“—because you don’t see how much Elinor and Mama are alike. Mama tells you what to do and you do it. Elinor tells you what to do and you do it.”

“But, Sister, that’s the whole problem. Elinor won’t tell me what she wants!”

“Of course, she won’t,” said Sister. “She is waiting for you to do a little something on your own. That’s why she won’t say anything. She’s not gone say anything against Mama. She’s not gone tell you what you ought to do. But, Oscar… my Lord, if you sat down for five minutes you’d know what to do. And why you haven’t done it, I’ll never know!”

Sister got up and walked out of the room. Oscar sat there a quarter of an hour longer staring out the window at the river. In all his life he had never heard Sister speak so much to the purpose.

On the last Thursday in May, Oscar dropped by his uncle’s house on his way home. As usual, Elinor, Zaddie, and Grace sat on the front porch. Zaddie and Elinor were shelling early peas; Grace was reading aloud from a book about Eskimos. Oscar leaned over close to Elinor and said without preamble, “Elinor, you think you could take tomorrow off from school?”

“I could,” replied Elinor. “Is there a reason why I should?”

“There is,” said Oscar.

“Then I’ll do it,” said Elinor. She didn’t ask his reason.

“Why?” said Grace.

“Shhh!” said Oscar. “Not a word to my mama, not a word to anybody, you hear, Grace? You hear, Zaddie?”

“We hear!” cried Zaddie and Grace in unison.

“I’m taking off tomorrow, too,” said Oscar. “Elinor, I’ll be over just as soon as Mama leaves for Mobile. She is going with Caroline DeBordenave. Miss Caroline likes to leave early, I know that.”

Elinor nodded, and said only, “Oscar, Miss Mary-Love is looking at you from the side porch and probably wondering what you are whispering about.”

“Hey, Mama!” cried Oscar, as he turned and waved. “I’m home now!”

Caroline DeBordenave and Mary-Love Caskey left at seven o’clock the following morning in Caroline’s automobile. They intended to stay the night in Mobile. Oscar, who had lingered over his breakfast so long that his mother began to wonder, got up and watched the car go off. “Sister,” he said, “you gone help Elinor and me today?”

“Help you what?” asked Sister, slicing the crust off a piece of toast.

Oscar turned back with a grin.

“Help us get married, that’s what.”

Zaddie was raking the yard and glancing up at the clear sky, wondering when the clouds would roll in—she knew it was going to rain because Miss Elinor had told her so. Miss Elinor, Grace, and James Caskey were still at breakfast. Oscar walked into James’s house without knocking.

Elinor said, “Zaddie is going over to the school at seven-thirty and tell Miz Digman I’m not feeling well.” She still did not ask Oscar the reason for his request that she stay at home.

“I am head of the school board,” said James Caskey. “Oscar, I cain’t approve of Elinor’s lying to Miz Digman, so I want you to tell Elinor and I want you to tell me what all this is about.”

“Elinor and I are gone be married today.”

Elinor didn’t look a bit surprised. “What does Miss Mary-Love say to that?”

“I don’t know,” said Oscar.

“What about your bargain?” asked Elinor.

“Mama tricked me into that! Mama got me by surprise!”

“This is not going to make her happy, Oscar. She may even take back her house.”

“And give it to who?” demanded James Caskey, actually pleased with Oscar’s decision, even if it meant deceiving both Miz Digman and Mary-Love.

“Me!” cried Grace. “I want it. It’s got a sleeping porch on the second floor and Aunt Mary-Love said there was gone be four swings on it. Daddy, you and me and Zaddie can live there.”

“I am not leaving this house,” replied James, who always responded to his daughter’s wildest suggestions with the utmost gravity.

“Mama cain’t do anything,” said Oscar. “I have got a license and I have talked to Miz Driver and that is that.”

“I’m glad,” said James. “I think you are doing the right thing, Oscar. I think you are going about it the right way, but I just want Miss Elinor to know that we are all gone shrivel up and die without her. Aren’t we, Grace?”

Grace nodded her head vigorously. “We’re gone die!”

“You are not,” said Elinor. “Where is this wedding supposed to take place? And when is it?”

“Today, of course. Today, while Mama is in Mobile. I don’t know where, I—”

“Here!” cried Grace.

“Here,” said James. “Have it right here in the parlor.”

“All right,” said Oscar.

Elinor took Oscar’s proposal that they be married immediately with an almost bewildering calmness, as if she had for months past expected this most unexpected thing. She merely said, “Oscar, I want to finish my breakfast. Then I will have to see about something to wear. You haven’t given me much time to prepare.”

Sister, in fact, was seeing about the dress. She had called Miz Daughtry, the dressmaker, and before Elinor had got up from the table, that woman was knocking on the door. Elinor had a biscuit in

one hand and a cup of coffee in the other as Miz Daughtry took her measurements.

All morning long, while Miz Daughtry sat in the sewing room and cut out the dress that Elinor Dam-mert was to be married in, Ivey Sapp baked cakes and pies, and Roxie Welles worked on the wedding supper. Zaddie took a hatchet and went down to the banks of the Perdido and hacked off tree branches to decorate James Caskey's parlor.

Elinor and Oscar and James sat down for a hurried dinner at twelve o'clock, joined by Annie Bell Driver. Elinor had been in town almost a year now, but was close really to no one but James and Grace and Oscar. Outside the Caskey family and the children at the school, Elinor saw no one, with the exception of Annie Bell Driver, who would stop for a quarter-hour or so when she drove her wagon past James Caskey's house and saw Miss Elinor sitting on the porch. Elinor and the female preacher were by no means intimate, but Annie Bell knew Mary-Love and knew what Mary-Love thought of the engagement of her son to Miss Elinor. So Oscar had asked Annie Bell to perform the wedding ceremony not only because of her friendship with Elinor, but also because no other preacher in town would risk Mary-Love's displeasure.

After dinner Elinor sent Zaddie with a note to tell Miz Digman that she was feeling much better, so much better in fact that she had decided she might as well go on and get married to Oscar and probably wouldn't be back in the school until Tuesday. Zaddie brought back congratulations from Miz Digman. She brought back Grace, too, which was just as well since Grace was almost delirious with thoughts of the wedding and hadn't heard a word that her teacher had said all morning long. In the afternoon Elinor and Oscar packed for the honeymoon and Sister sat weeping on the front porch. By two o'clock it had begun to rain, just a little at first from clouds that didn't even completely cover the sky. The sun shone through to the south, and formed a rainbow that arched over the Perdido. Ivey

Sapp told Zaddie that the rain falling as the sun shone was indisputable evidence that the devil was beating his wife.

“Sister!” said Oscar, coming through the front door out onto the porch, “what are you crying for?”

“You’re getting married, Oscar!”

“I know it,” said Oscar. “I am doing it on purpose, too. I have gone out of my way.”

“You are leaving me here with Mama. It’s a crying shame! I want to go with you and Elinor tonight. Take me with you!”

“Sister, we cain’t take you on our honeymoon. You know that.”

“I want to go! I don’t want to be the one to tell Mama you got married while she was out shopping for portieres!”

I’ll tell her—after the honeymoon. Though truth to tell, Sister, I don’t much look forward to it. But it’s my wedding and I’ll be the one who tells her.”

“Oscar, she’s gone know as soon as she gets back and sees you gone and sees Elinor gone too!”

“You tell Mama we couldn’t wait, you tell Mama I couldn’t wait all summer long.”

The rain was pouring down off the roof and splashing on the porch railing; Oscar pulled back. Elinor waved to him from next door. “Half an hour!” she called. “Send Zaddie over here and let Roxie fix her head!”

The wedding was at five o’clock. The parlor was decorated with the hemlock and cedar branches that had overspread the Perdido that morning. Miz Daughtry hadn’t had time to finish the dress, and it was only basted together, so the dressmaker warned Elinor not to make any sudden moves or try to lift her arms. Zaddie and Grace were flower girls, dressed in white, with baskets of crape myrtle petals over their arms. James Caskey gave Elinor away. Roxie and

Ivey and Bray were the only guests, and they stood in the dining room door. Sister sat on the sofa and wept bitter tears.

The rain never let up, and now the sky was completely clouded over.

To be heard over the noise of the rain beating against the windows and the roof, Annie Bell Driver had to speak as loudly as if she were delivering a sermon in a Mobile church. Rain rattled the windowpanes and splashed off the sills and dripped down the chimney until the entire room smelled of rain-soaked evergreens.

Bray had put the couple's suitcases in the Torpedo earlier, and Elinor wouldn't even take an umbrella to get through the downpour to the automobile parked in front of Mary-Love's house. The temporary stitches in her sleeve pulled apart as she lifted her arm to wave to everybody on the front porch. She sat laughing on the front seat as soaked-to-the-skin Oscar drove off down the street that was three inches deep in churning water dyed the color of the clay beneath—dyed red, Perdido red.

CHAPTER 7
Genevieve

By the afternoon of the first Monday in June the weather had turned hot in Perdido. The river behind the Caskey houses flowed low, muddier and redder than ever before. Mary-Love and Sister sat on the side porch out of the reach of the oppressive declining sun. Mary-Love had two large pieces of patterned cotton, one in light blue and the other in a pale violet, and by a cardboard pattern was cutting out squares and triangles. Sister, who had patience and a steady eye, was stitching these together to form large squares. In another week or so, they'd have enough to put together a quilt.

Sister looked up when Oscar's automobile pulled up in front of the house; Mary-Love didn't.

"Is that them, Sister?" Mary-Love asked calmly.

Sister looked apprehensively at her mother and nodded. Upon her return from Mobile the Saturday previous, Mary-Love had learned immediately from Sister of her son's precipitous wedding with the red-haired schoolteacher. But from the moment that that dread news fell trembling from Sister's lips, Mary-Love had allowed no one to speak a word about the subject. Friends—even Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk—with congratulations sincere or ironic, had been turned from the door. People felt that Mary-Love was taking it badly, but no one could know for sure. Certainly it must have been humiliating for your only son to get married one afternoon when you were down in Mobile picking out curtain material. Mary-Love hadn't even gone to church, and Sister for two days had been afraid to speak for fear some chance word would kindle her mother's dangerously smoldering resentment into searing flame, "What is Miss Elinor wearing, Sister?"

“She looks real pretty, Mama.”

“I’m sure she does,” said Mary-Love, and her scissors went clack-clack.

Elinor and Oscar came up the flagstone walk to the front porch.

“We’re around here!” Sister called from the side porch.

Elinor rounded the corner unhesitatingly. Oscar, with two suitcases, hung back. He had allowed himself to cherish a faint hope that his mother had decided to leave town for a few weeks, and he stood still a moment, recovering from the disappointment that she was sitting there on the porch, awaiting their return with a pair of scissors in her hand.

“Afternoon, Sister. Afternoon, Miss Mary-Love. Oscar and I are back now.”

“Oh, you’re so pretty!” cried Sister, getting up so quickly that the unsewn squares and triangles of material spilled out of her lap onto the rug at her feet.

“Sister,” cried her mother reproachfully, “I have gone to so much trouble…!”

“Mama, I’m sorry, but isn’t Miss Elinor pretty, she—”

“She certainly is,” said Mary-Love quickly. “Come here, Elinor, and kiss me.” Obediently, Elinor went over and lightly kissed Mary-Love’s upraised cheek. “Oscar,” said Mary-Love.

Oscar came around the corner. “Mama, we’re back.”

“Aren’t you going to kiss me?”

Oscar did so, and then the newly married couple stood together before Mary-Love’s chair.

“So,” said Mary-Love, “you just couldn’t wait.”

“Not one minute longer,” said Elinor.

Mary-Love looked at them together for perhaps five seconds. Then she picked up her scissors and her cardboard pattern again. That was all she intended to say.

“Mama,” Oscar began apologetically, “it’s not that we didn’t want you at the wedding, it’s—”

“Don’t apologize to me!” cried Mary-Love quickly, looking up at him once more. “I wasn’t the one getting married! This has saved me trouble and expense! But you know, Oscar, that house next door is not ready for you yet. It’s not near ready—”

“I know, but, Mama—”

“Where do you and Elinor intend on living, I’d like to know?”

“With James,” replied Oscar. “James said we should just stay on in Elinor’s room until our house is fixed up. He didn’t want to lose us at all, and it would do him good to have us both around, he said. He said Grace wasn’t ready to let go of Elinor, either.”

Sister’s teeth went clack-clack.

“What’s wrong?” Oscar asked.

Elinor had seated herself in the swing across from Mary-Love, and Oscar backed down into it beside her.

“You’re not gone be staying over there,” said Mary-Love.

“You cain’t stay with James!” cried Sister. “Poor Grace!”

“Why not?” demanded Oscar. “James told me—”

“Sit real still,” said Mary-Love with her scissors poised. “Sit real still and be quiet.” Elinor stopped rocking the swing, anchoring it with her foot. Oscar and Sister held their breaths. From across the yard they heard a woman’s strident voice within James Caskey’s house. Oscar then also noticed the absence of footprints in the sand between the houses, which was strange, for the constant back-and-forthing had resumed in recent months. The strident voice within the house rose and fell, and as they listened, it moved from the dining room window to the kitchen window.

Oscar had turned pale.

“Poor Grace,” sighed Sister.

“Poor Roxie,” said Mary-Love quickly. “Poor James.”

“Lord,” whispered Oscar, “Genevieve is back.”

Elinor resumed her rocking. “When did she get here?” she asked.

“Yesterday morning,” said Sister. “She was sitting on the front porch with two suitcases when James and Grace and I came back from church. She stood up and held out her arms and said, ‘Grace, you come hug me,’ and Grace wouldn’t do it.”

“Do you blame her?” said Mary-Love. “Would you have done it?”

“Genevieve is Grace’s mama,” said Sister.

“Elinor,” said Mary-Love, “I don’t know whether I’m glad or sad that you weren’t here yesterday morning.”

“Why is that, Miss Mary-Love?”

“There’s nobody in this family that can handle Genevieve. *I* can’t. Sister, can you?”

“No!” wailed Sister. “Course I cain’t!”

“And I know Oscar and James cain’t. I have always thought that maybe you could. That is what I have hoped.”

“I bet she could,” said Oscar proudly. “I bet Elinor could handle anybody. Elinor,” he said, turning to his wife, “why are they not asking you to head up the League of Nations? You have any idea why you have been passed over?”

Mary-Love ignored her son’s facetious interruption. “But maybe it was better you and Oscar were off somewhere—where’d you go, anyway?”

“We were at Gulf Shores,” replied Elinor. “I asked Oscar to take me there because I enjoy the water so much.”

“Y’all ought to have seen Elinor in the waves,” said Oscar proudly. “Elinor is not one bit afraid of undertow.”

“I bet it was pretty!” cried Sister.

“It was,” said Elinor. “But when it comes down to it, I feel more at home in fresh water than salt.”

Mary-Love ignored this exchange as well. “Genevieve knows all about you, Elinor.”

“What does she know?”

“Knows how you were living in James’s house. Knows how you took care of him, and took care of Grace,” said Mary-Love. “Knows everything there is to know,” she concluded with a little meaningful nod.

“How does she know?” asked Elinor.

“Grace told her,” said Sister. “Yesterday afternoon we were sitting here doing just what we’re doing now, and there was Genevieve on the porch again with poor old Grace having to stand right in front of her and tell her everything that’s happened in the past fifteen months.”

“That’s how long Genevieve has been in Nashville,” Oscar explained. “We were kind of hoping she would stay away a month or two longer.”

“We were hoping,” Mary-Love corrected, “that she would stay away for the remainder of eternity. That is what we were hoping. I cain’t deal with her—I get so mad!”

Mary-Love Caskey was in an ethical quandary. She couldn’t approve of her son’s sudden marriage to Elinor Dammert any more than she really approved of Elinor Dammert herself, but she had in her honesty acknowledged that she had never known James Caskey as happy as Elinor had made him since his mother’s death. That point in Elinor’s favor had become apparent really only with Genevieve’s return. Mary-Love knew, at any rate, that she couldn’t

possibly do battle with both women at once, and so she might as well pit one against the other, even if that meant a sudden truce with Elinor—and even if that truce fostered the inaccurate impression that Elinor had been forgiven for her marriage to Oscar.

"Elinor," said Mary-Love after a few moments, "you are going to be cramped upstairs, I'm afraid."

"Mama, you want us here? I thought—"

"Where else would you go?" Mary-Love demanded. "Is there someplace else in this town where you could stay except the Osceola? Have you thought of Elinor's memories of that hotel, Oscar? Or do you intend on moving into a house that doesn't have all its walls yet?"

"No, but—"

"No buts," said Mary-Love. "Elinor, you'll be happy to know that Oscar's room looks out on the river. You love that old Perdido!"

Genevieve Caskey was neither as unpleasant nor as dangerous as Mary-Love's talk suggested. She was scarcely more than a shrew, and at times she wasn't even that. She had married James Caskey because of his money and because by nature he was easily dominated. She made her husband unhappy principally because James had no business being married in the first place. He had the heart and the mind of the perennial bachelor, and the acquisition of a wife had done nothing to erase the stamp of femininity with which he was so firmly branded. Perhaps Genevieve's offensive reputation in Perdido was due to no more than the fact that Mary-Love had taken a preliminary dislike to her, and carefully fostered that dislike until it had grown into loathing—and dread. And perhaps Mary-Love's friends had adopted that attitude—in each of its progressively virulent stages—out of politeness to Mary-Love. And perhaps the entire town had grown so used to hearing of Genevieve Caskey as a monster of selfishness, ill humor, and drunkenness that it could no longer look upon James Caskey's wife in any other light, even when

Genevieve's behavior— which actually was relatively mild—did nothing to support those widely held opinions.

Genevieve had spent three years in Perdido immediately after her marriage, and there was not a person introduced to her who didn't find out within five minutes that Genevieve Caskey thought that Perdido, Alabama, was the slowest, dullest, smallest, most insignificant town in the entire South. "I could have more fun in thirty minutes in New Orleans or Nashville just standing on a corner than I could spending the rest of my life in Perdido. The most exciting thing to do in Perdido is sit on the bank of the river and count the dead possums floating by!"

Thus, concretely, it might have been said against Genevieve that she wasn't a woman who was at pains to accommodate to her husband. The same might have been said about a number of other wives in Perdido. Genevieve's other indisputable flaw was that she drank. Manda Turk maintained that Genevieve Caskey would have walked through the front door of a saloon if ladies had been allowed in—or if Perdido had had one. Everybody knew she drank, even though Roxie tied the bottles up in croker sacks, wrapped in rags so they wouldn't rattle. When her boy Escue drove his goat cart to the dump with the croker sacks in the back, people looked and said, "Oh, Lord, there goes James Caskey's curse!" Gen-evieve would drink anything she could get. She'd buy from the Indians out in the piney woods, and the two little girls on the swayback mule would bring it to the door. She'd send Bray over the Florida state line, where liquor sales were legal, and have him cart it back by the case. She'd sit right in the front window, in the daytime, with a bottle and a glass sitting on the table in front of her.

Yet she was beautiful and her dresses came from New York. She was also smart as a whip, and could rattle off all three names of every president the men of the United States had ever voted into office. When she stayed away, which was most of the time, James Caskey sent her seven hundred dollars a month and paid the bills that she

had directed to Perdido. When she came to Perdido, he cowered in her presence and gave her anything else she asked for.

Grace Caskey dreamed of her mother every night, but rarely pleasantly. When Genevieve was away, Grace wanted her home and when she was home she wanted her to go away. The child regarded her mother with an awe that had very little in it of affection. On her rare trips home, Genevieve Caskey would look her daughter up and down, and first thing—before she would even kiss the child—she would sit down on the porch, dig a hard-bristled brush out of her purse, and brush the child's hair and scalp until Grace wept from the pain. As she brushed and Grace wept, Genevieve Caskey would cry, "Oh, one of these days, honey, I'm taking you away from your daddy. I'm taking you away from this town. I'm gone show you Nashville! You and I are gone walk down those streets like nobody's business. We are gone get your daddy to buy us a brand-new automobile and I'm gone drive you around and show you off as the prettiest seven-year-old in the entire state of Tennessee!" Grace didn't dare protest that she didn't want to leave either her father or Perdido, and she lived in mortal fear that when Genevieve went away again, as Genevieve always did, suddenly and without warning, she would be locked in one of her mother's suitcases and spirited off to Nashville.

James Caskey heard these promises—or threats— but he knew that his wife had no real thought of encumbering herself with their daughter. He didn't know and didn't want to know what sort of life Genevieve led in Nashville, but he knew that whatever it was like, a seven-year-old child was likely to interfere with its pleasures.

Oscar and Elinor hadn't even had the chance to take their bags inside the house that Monday afternoon before they heard the back door of James Caskey's house slam. Sister stood up and peered over the camellias.

"Oh, Lord, Mama, here comes Genevieve! And I don't believe it, she's carrying a pound cake on a round platter."

Mary-Love stood up and so did Oscar. Elinor remained in the swing.

“Hey, Genevieve!” Oscar called out.

“Is she sober? Does she look sober to you, Sister?” Mary-Love hissed.

“Hey, Oscar!” Genevieve called back. “I heard you got married. I heard I missed the wedding by thirty-six hours and I was sick at my heart to hear it! I am bringing your new wife a pound cake.” She marched across the yard, obliterating a number of Zaddie’s painstaking swirls.

She mounted the steps of the side porch. “Mary-Love, Sister,” she said in greeting. This was a very mild greeting indeed, for the fact was, since she had arrived Genevieve had not set eyes upon Mary-Love and had seen Sister only once. Genevieve looked in Elinor’s direction and smiled. “You’re Miss Elinor. Ooooh, my little girl is just in love with you! You have taken such good care of her! This time it looks like I’m not gone have to burn all her dresses. Miss Elinor, I brought this cake for you. I made Roxie sit in the corner while I made it myself.”

“Thank you, Miz Caskey.”

“You call me Genevieve. I put two pounds of white sugar in that cake. I am paying you back for making my husband fat in my protracted absence,” Genevieve said with a smile.

Elinor smiled back. “James was very good to me, and took me in when I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Oh, James is like that. That’s just what James is like. Where do you come from, Miss Elinor? Who are your people?”

Later, when Genevieve had gone back home, Sister and Oscar declared that they had never seen the woman so friendly. Mary-Love said, “I cain’t believe my own children would be taken in like that! Elinor, did you think she was friendly?”

“I think she wanted to get a good look at me. That is what I think,” replied Elinor.

“I think you are right,” said Mary-Love, though she wasn’t pleased to find herself on Elinor’s side against her own flesh and blood, even if the point was minor and made to the disparagement of Genevieve. “And, Elinor, I bet you think we have been doing Genevieve a disservice, talking about her like we have. I bet you think she’s not as bad as we’ve painted her. I bet you think maybe she doesn’t have a case of bourbon in the back of James’s closet.”

“I think,” said Elinor, “that Genevieve heard about as much about me as I’ve heard about her and she wanted to see what was true and what wasn’t.”

“Genevieve was being polite,” protested Oscar. “Mama, cain’t you and Elinor give her some credit?”

“She walked right by me,” said Sister. “If she had had liquor on her breath, I would have smelled it. And she didn’t.”

“Sister,” said Elinor, “the thing Genevieve Caskey would like most in this entire world would be to throw me headfirst in the Perdido River.”

“And are you gone give her a chance to do it?” asked Oscar.

“I am not,” replied Elinor, and everybody believed her.

CHAPTER 8
The Wedding Gift

As soon as school was over for Elinor at the beginning of June she and Oscar took a real wedding journey. They went to New York and Boston, and to everyone's surprise they traveled by boat from Pensacola. That was Elinor's idea, but most people thought it a clever one. Since the coming of the speedy trains no one thought of traveling by water; traveling by water was the poor man's transport. Anyone could jump on the back of a log and end up tomorrow night floating around in the Gulf of Mexico.

When Elinor returned from their honeymoon she and Mary-Love and Sister settled down in a polite truce ("for Oscar's sake," Mary-Love said). Even to such close and observant neighbors as Manda Turk and Caroline DeBordenave, the three women appeared to get along perfectly well. When Manda Turk rose with a toothache early one morning just at dawn, looked out her bedroom window and saw Elinor Caskey swimming around in the river wearing nothing but a white cotton shift, and later commented on the irregularity and possible impropriety of such a proceeding, Mary-Love went so far as actually to defend her daughter-in-law. "Oh, Caroline," sighed Mary-Love, "when yours get married, just wait, you'll see then how behind the times you are. I have come to believe that there is nothing wrong with early morning exercise."

Elinor and Oscar shared the room that before had been Oscar's alone. The largest bedchamber in the house, it was at the back of the second story. It had a small sitting room attached, and three windows that looked out over the Perdido. Despite these amenities, Oscar and Elinor would have preferred to be on their own, and not beneath the constantly watchful eye of Mary-Love Caskey.

There had been a halt in the progress of the house next door. There was only one contracting firm in Perdido—"firm" being a kind word for two white men named Hines and seven colored men who worked under them for one dollar and twenty-five cents a day. Henry Turk had begged Mary-Love to release the Hines brothers from their commitment to her so that they might be set to the task of rebuilding a new pulpwood storage barn for the Turk mill. Of the three millowners, Henry Turk had been most severely affected by the flood, and still was not quite recovered. Unknown to the other, Oscar and James had each lent him money, and those very funds were to be employed for this necessary construction. Mary-Love was pleased as punch to turn the contractors over to Henry, and she told him to keep them as long as he wanted. She even offered— as long as he promised not to tell—to lend him ten thousand dollars in case there was anything else he wanted put on his property. So the workmen went away, and the summer rains drummed down into what should have been rooms that provided privacy and contentment to Elinor and Oscar, but which were still only open areas of beams and planks and studs.

Oscar apologized to his wife for the delay. Elinor said only, "If it could be helped, Oscar, you'd be doing something, I imagine."

This cold reply goaded him into a bit of action, and he went to his mother, asking if he might not go down to Bay Minette and over to Atmore and Jay to see if there weren't someone else available for the job. The house ought to have been long finished by this time, he pointed out.

Mary-Love pointed out that a contract was a contract, and she had signed one with the Hines brothers, and she wasn't about to go back on it now. Oscar had to admit the justice of this, and at the same time reflected that it was, after all, his mother's money that was paying for everything and that she ought to do things exactly as she wanted them and no other way.

For the summer then, the uneasy Caskey household of Elinor and Oscar and Mary-Love and Sister settled down to a routine of getting

along with one another. They felt hemmed in a little with the unfinished construction on one side of them—boards were already beginning to darken with exposure— and Genevieve Caskey on the other. Mary-Love declared she didn't even like to look out the windows anymore. But of Mary-Love's three main sources of unease —her daughter-in-law who couldn't be managed the way Sister and Oscar could; her skeletal wedding gift half-risen out of the sand; or the specter of a mobilized Genevieve, lurching down the street swinging a bottle and forever disgracing the good Caskey name—she was probably most disturbed by Genevieve.

Every morning Mary-Love's household took breakfast on the screened-in side porch, and every morning Mary-Love asked her family: "Well, do you think today will be the day that Genevieve goes back to Nashville?" But it never was the day. Genevieve had remained in Perdido longer than anytime since the beginning of her marriage.

"I think *I* know why she's staying," said Sister one morning in a low voice.

"Why?" said Oscar quickly. It is a great mistake to imagine that men care less for gossip than women.

"Because of Elinor," replied Sister, nodding to her sister-in-law.

"Why me?" asked Elinor, who was rocking with her coffee.

"Genevieve comes back here and she discovers that her husband has been happy in her absence. James had you, Elinor. He had you to take care of him and Grace, and you made him happy."

"James was good to me," said Elinor simply. "And I dote on Grace."

"We all do," snapped Mary-Love. "Except for Genevieve. If she cared a straw for those two, she'd throw herself into the junction directly. Elinor, maybe one day you ought to take her for a ride in Bray's little boat."

Elinor smiled, then looked in the direction of James Caskey's house, though her view, for the practical purpose of observation, was obscured by camellias. "They seem to be doing all right. I don't believe that Genevieve has made so much of a problem of herself."

"Have you talked to Grace, Elinor?" said Mary-Love. "Grace is not a happy child, not the way she was happy when it was you living over there and not her mama. I wish things were the way they used to be."

It was not lost on anyone on that porch that "the way they used to be" denoted a time before Oscar and Elinor were married.

Ivey brought out more coffee and said: "Miss Genevieve thinks Miss Elinor gone talk Mr. James into getting a divorce."

"How you know that, Ivey?" asked Oscar.

"Zaddie told me," replied Ivey, and went back inside.

"Zaddie would know," Elinor pointed out.

"That child listens at windows!" cried Mary-Love, who had never forgiven Zaddie for becoming Elinor's creature. "She climbs on a cement block and leans her face against the screen!"

"No, she doesn't," said Elinor calmly. "Zaddie's just got good ears, and in the morning when she's out raking the yard she hears things through open windows."

"Would you try to talk James into a divorce, Elinor?" her husband asked.

"I don't believe in divorce," said Elinor. "But I don't believe in marrying the wrong person, either," she added after a moment.

So Genevieve remained in Perdido. If she drank, at least she didn't drink sitting in the front window, nor did she go down the sidewalk swinging a bottle. She'd go to church and sit in the Caskey pew next to Elinor, but she wouldn't go to Sunday school; this, Mary-Love maintained, was so she wouldn't have to talk to anybody. The half-hour between Sunday school and morning service was a great social occasion at every church in Perdido, and if Genevieve showed

up during the organ prelude, then she didn't have to speak to anybody. And that's exactly what Genevieve did, sidling into the pew and taking hold of Grace's hand and only nodding to Elinor, Sister, and Mary-Love.

Once or twice Genevieve invited Elinor to ride with her down to Mobile to go shopping, and Elinor accepted the invitation. Genevieve liked to drive herself, and the two women took Zaddie along to carry packages. When Genevieve shopped, with James's money, there was sure to be a great load for Zaddie to balance on her outstretched arms. Mary-Love totally approved of these excursions. "Oh, Sister," she'd say, nodding, "it gets Elinor out of the house—and it's like old times, just you and me and Oscar here for dinner. It also means that Elinor has to deal with Genevieve and we don't."

"They get along all right," Sister pointed out.

"I'm not a bit surprised," said Mary-Love darkly.

"But I also think," said Sister in Elinor's defense, "that she is trying to keep an eye on Genevieve. It's because of what you said about Grace being unhappy with her mama. Elinor loves that child the way we do!"

Oddly, it was Genevieve Caskey who was to alter the entire future and aspect of Perdido. Weary of listening to James's stories of the flood and his fears of its possible recurrence, she suggested, "Well, why in the world don't you just build a levee?"

James Caskey fell back into his chair in astonishment that no one had thought of such a simple solution before.

"Natchez has a levee," Genevieve pointed out. "New Orleans has a levee. Those places don't flood. There's no reason Perdido cain't have a levee, is there? If Perdido had a levee I wouldn't have to look at that damn river anymore."

The idea took hold of James Caskey. He told Oscar about it, and the next night brought it up as new business before the school board, though it was not, strictly speaking, within the school board's scope

of concern. Oscar, however, broached the matter at town council meeting, but by then all of Perdido had discussed and mostly approved the idea. Only two people in town were against the earthen embankment: one was an ancient white woman who lived on the edge of Baptist Bottom and said that murderous spirits were fostered in mounds of earth. The other was Elinor Caskey.

Elinor declared the levee ugly, costly, and impractical. Above the junction, the levee would have to be built all along the southern bank of the Perdido—this would not only spoil their view of the river and take away the mooring dock, it would hem them in till they would all think they were going to smother. On the Blackwater side, the three sawmills would no longer have free access to the river. Logs that were to be sent downstream to other sawmills or to the Gulf would have to be dragged all the way south of town. Below the junction, the levee would have to be built on both sides of the river, to protect downtown, the workers' houses, and Baptist Bottom. New bridges would have to be constructed, at enormous expense, and in the end Perdido would look as if it had been sunk into an old clay quarry. The town would have sacrificed its charm and received in exchange nothing but the illusion of safety. Illusion of safety, because no levee could be built so strong or so high that it would hold back the river water when the river water wanted to rise. A flood, Elinor declared vehemently, wasn't to be held back by mounds of earth.

"Lord, Genevieve," said Elinor the morning after the town council meeting at which funds for an engineering study were approved, "I don't know why you wanted to make trouble and bring it up!"

"This town is gone wash away in the next heavy rain if they don't build 'emselves a levee." Genevieve was standing in her kitchen, mixing a cake. She put in a whole cup of dark rum, using the liquor instead of milk. "I for one will be glad of it, too. I hate the sight of that water, Elinor. I know you like to swim in it and all, but give me dust and dry land! The Lord God deliver me from a watery grave!"

Despite Mary-Love's best efforts for a delay, the house next door was finished the last week in July. The Hines brothers displayed an

inconvenient sort of honesty, which dictated as strict a compliance with their original deadline as possible. Mary-Love pleaded with each of the brothers in private to follow their own best interests and work on Henry Turk's projects, but each of the brothers held up his hand, and said, "Miz Caskey, a promise is a promise, and we know how anxious Oscar is to get his new house."

So, on the seventh of August, right after church, Elinor set foot for the first time in the mansion that was her wedding gift. Oscar showed her around with pride. It was, in fact, a very fine house: large, square, and white. On the first floor were a kitchen, a breakfast room, two pantries, a back porch for washing, a dining room, two parlors, and a narrow front porch for rocking. On the second floor, arranged around a central hallway, were two bedroom suites containing bedchamber, sitting room, dressing room, and bath; two more smaller bedrooms; a nursery or maid's room; a third bath; and a vast screened-in sleeping porch in the back corner, that overlooked the Per-dido. It was this last room that seemed to please Elinor most.

"Mama," said Oscar excitedly, on their return to his mother's house, "Elinor just loves it!"

"How could she not?" said Mary-Love calmly.

"It's a beautiful house," said Elinor, who in Mary-Love's opinion might have said a good deal more, perhaps adding such words as, Thank you, Miss Mary-Love.

"Mama, when can we move in?" Oscar asked. "We're both anxious!"

"Oh, not yet!" Mary-Love cried. "Oscar, did you see any draperies up in that house?"

"No, but—"

"Do you want all and sundry looking in your windows? Sister and I are beginning work on the draperies this week. And Friday week we're going to Mobile to look for furniture."

“Mama,” said Oscar, “it doesn’t have to be perfect, you know. Elinor and I are gone be living in that house for the rest of our lives. There’ll be time enough to fill it up with furniture.”

“Think of me!” cried Mary-Love. “Think of Sister and me. How you think we’re gone feel when Elinor invites people over and they come in and look? People are gone say, ‘Lord, if this was a wedding gift from Mary-Love Caskey, I cain’t say she put herself out when it came furniture and drapery time.”

“Mama,” pleaded Oscar, “there’s not a person in this town who’s gone say that.”

“They’ll think it,” Mary-Love insisted, and the upshot was that Oscar and Elinor remained under Mary-Love’s roof while their finished home sat empty.

Mary-Love kept up a careful pretense of furnishing the house. She was driven to Mobile once a week to select drapery fabric and dining room suites and carpets and crystal. Mary-Love shopped with all the apparent pleasure of a condemned criminal picking out the rope with which he is to be hanged. She never returned to Perdido with more than one item, and sometimes that solitary purchase was laughably small. Women had gotten the vote. Women might elect a president of their own sex by the time that Mary-Love had filled that house to her satisfaction.

Sister sometimes went along on these excursions, but never with complete willingness. She was requisitioned by her mother not for the assistance she might lend in the matter of purchases, but rather in her capacity as listening post. Outside of Perdido, and away from Oscar and the servants, Mary-Love could rave about Elinor without stint. It was Mary-Love’s custom to go down on a Friday morning, shop Friday afternoon, visit friends in the evening—she had been born in Mobile, and still had people there— put up at the Government House, do more shopping on Saturday, and return home by suppertime Saturday night. Oscar particularly looked forward to these days when his mother was absent, for Mary-Love so

much paraded the air of the martyr, with a dour face and words, that the atmosphere of the house was brightened every time she walked out the door.

It had not been lost on Oscar that Elinor had not said a word when Mary-Love had denied them permission to move into their own home. He remembered his conversation with Sister and understood now that Elinor was waiting for him to act properly in the matter. But how to act properly was exactly the difficulty. When he attempted to explain to his wife why he was giving in to his mother in this matter—saying that, after all, the house was Mary-Love's gift and she ought to be able to fix it up exactly the way she wanted it—Elinor wouldn't listen.

"Oscar, this is between you and Miss Mary-Love. When you make a decision, you tell me what it is— that's all I need to know about it."

Oscar sighed. He loved Elinor and he was very happy being married to her. But sometimes he looked at her closely and he wondered to himself, Who is she? That was a question he couldn't begin to answer.

What he did know was that Elinor was very much like his mother: strong-willed and dominant, wielding power in a fashion he could never hope to emulate. That was the great misconception about men: because they dealt with money, because they could hire someone on and later fire him, because they alone filled state assemblies and were elected congressional representatives, everyone thought they had power. Yet all the hiring and firing, the land deals and the lumber contracts, the complicated process for putting through a constitutional amendment—these were only bluster. They were blinds to disguise the fact of men's real powerlessness in life. Men controlled the legislatures, but when it came down to it, they didn't control themselves. Men had failed to study their own minds sufficiently, and because of this failure they were at the mercy of fleeting passions; men, much more than women, were moved by petty jealousies and the desire for petty revenges. Because they enjoyed their enormous but superficial power, men had never been

forced to know themselves the way that women, in their adversity and superficial subservience, had been forced to learn about the workings of their brains and their emotions.

Oscar knew that Mary-Love and Elinor could think and scheme rings around him. They got what they wanted. In fact, every female on the census rolls of Perdido, Alabama, got what she wanted. Of course, no man admitted that he was railroaded by his mother, his sister, his wife, his daughter, his cook, or by any female who happened to walk along the street toward him—most of them, in fact, didn't even know it. But Oscar did; yet even knowing of his inferiority, his real powerlessness, he was helpless to throw off any of the fetters that bound him.

Who was Elinor Caskey? And where did she come from? She didn't talk about her people. They had lived in Wade, in Fayette County, and now they were all dead. Her father had once run a ferry across the Tombigbee River. Elinor had gone to Huntingdon College, but Oscar didn't even know who had paid for her schooling. She never talked about her girlfriends in Montgomery, never got letters from them, never wrote herself. Elinor had appeared one day in a corner room of the Osceola Hotel and Oscar had married her. That's all there was to it.

Elinor wasn't Oscar's only mystery, of course. There were many things Oscar didn't understand. He didn't understand what was going on between Mary-Love and Elinor; he only knew that he was glad he wasn't at home all day the way Sister was. He didn't know what Elinor saw in him; he didn't know why she loved him, though apparently she did.

He'd get up at five in the morning, and stand at his bedroom window and look out at the Perdido. There he'd see his wife, wearing her coarse cotton nightgown, swimming around and around in the swift water that would have drowned any normal person. And there'd be Zaddie, sitting on the mooring dock, dangling her feet in the current and holding her rake across her lap. The sun wouldn't even be over the trees yet. And good Lord!—the water oaks that Elinor had

planted only a little more than a year before were twenty feet high and a foot around! They were planted in clumps of two and three and four, and at the level of the ground their trunks were already starting to grow together. Water oaks, Oscar knew, were the only oak trees that would clump like birches. Zaddie would rake a vast system of concentric circles around each clump, and now the yard resembled a cypress swamp, but with slender oaks and raked sand taking the place of clumps of cypress and rippling water.

They were narrow spindly trees with gray bark and tiny leathery dark-green leaves that grew only at the top. Lower branches quickly lost their leaves, rotted, and fell to the earth, to be gathered up by Zaddie and tossed into the river. In the winter the leaves turned an even darker green, but didn't fall off until pushed aside by new growth in the spring. Beyond the camellia and azalea beds that grew alongside the houses the sandy yards still wouldn't grow a single blade of grass, but those water oaks grew faster than any tree Oscar had ever seen— and the Caskeys had made their fortune through intimate and extensive knowledge of the forests and trees of Baldwin County. His bedroom view of the river would soon be obscured by the foliage of the water oaks. Sometimes he would come home in the afternoon and see that strange youthful forest that had raised itself and he would exclaim: "Mama, have you ever seen anything like the way those trees have grown!"

And Mary-Love on the side porch would only say: "Those are Elinor's trees."

And Sister, sitting beside her, would say: "Elinor loves "em."

And Elinor opening the front door for him would say: "These yards won't grow a blade of grass. We had to have something."

CHAPTER 9
The Road to Atmore

It was generally understood in Perdido that the intimacy that had formed between Genevieve Caskey and Elinor Caskey—two women who had every cause to dislike and mistrust each other—had its origin in each lady's desire to keep an eye on the other. Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk congratulated Mary-Love on the possession of a daughter-in-law who would go to such lengths for the well-being of the family. Mary-Love did not accept the compliment, and maintained that Genevieve and Elinor were exactly suited to each other. It was no more than the fellow-feeling of moral criminals, she said, that sent them off to Mobile together shopping for shoes. However, after Genevieve's suggestion that a levee he built to protect Perdido from high water, Elinor in a fury declared, "I won't have anything more to do with that woman."

The summer went on, and like all summers in that part of the world, it was brutally hot. The thermometer outside the kitchen window of Mary-Love's house read at least eighty degrees every morning at six-thirty when Zaddie began to rake. By the time she was finished at nine, the temperature had hit ninety. The Caskey women remained out on the side porch all morning long, sewing on their patchwork quilt, though none of them could think—in such heat—that there would be a season when a quilt would be wanted on someone's bed.

They also took their dinners on the side porch as soon as Oscar came home. They drank vast quantities of iced tea. In the afternoon, the weather was at its most oppressive. It accumulated in the leathery leaves of the water oaks and burned the sand of the yards until it was so hot that it could scorch a bare foot.

The heat was quiet. On the worst afternoons there was no noise at all. Birds had fled so deeply into the forest that their calls could no longer be heard. Dogs had crept into the cool sand beneath houses and lay miserably with their heads upon their outstretched forepaws. People didn't visit one another because they feared falling down in a faint on the sidewalk if they ventured out of the shade. And those remaining at home didn't talk much because they were logy from having drunk too much iced tea with their dinner.

On one particular such afternoon, at about three o'clock, nothing at all could be heard around the Caskey houses except the lapping of the river water against the pilings of the mooring dock. Sister and Elinor sat on a glider on the side porch. The edge of the quilting frame was tilted down toward them and they were slowly working on the second line of squares. Elinor had never done a quilt before, so for her benefit and instruction Sister had suggested using the simplest quilting stitch she knew. Complaining how her eyes watered in such heat, Mary-Love had abandoned her place at the frame. She now rocked in her chair across from the two women and occasionally addressed a remark to no one in particular, which no one in particular saw fit to answer. Ivey Sapp sat nearby shelling peanuts into a wide white enameled pan and discarding the shells onto sheets of newspaper unfolded at her feet.

The quiet that had persisted for some time was suddenly broken by a scream—a tiny, convulsive scream that came, quite obviously, from James Caskey's house. Sister and Elinor pushed their needles through the fabric and turned their heads in unison; Mary-Love stood up from her chair; Ivey leaned forward and placed her white enameled bowl on the floor of the porch.

"Lord!" said Elinor after a moment. "That is Grace!"

"That is Grace!" said Sister.

They hadn't known it immediately, because no one had ever heard Grace scream before.

“What is that woman doing?” said Mary-Love, turning pale. “What is she doing to Grace?”

There was another scream, choked off after a few seconds. Then the back door of James Caskey’s house suddenly slammed and the women on the porch, all standing now, saw Zaddie running across the yard toward them. She was obviously terrified.

She clambered breathlessly up the front steps. “Miss Genevieve is beating on Grace!”

In the brief silence that followed Zaddie’s announcement, they could hear another of Grace’s convulsive sobs, then another scream, stifled immediately.

“What did Grace do?” cried Mary-Love.

“She went and done knocked over a lamp by the cord!” said Zaddie breathlessly. Her speech, in moments of stress, lost the polish it had gained in her extensive reading. “Grace and me were playing in the hall, just playing, and Grace went and catched her foot on the cord and knocked over the lamp and it went and broke and Miss Genevieve come out and she done picked up that lamp and done heaved it at me but it didn’t hit me. Then she went and picked up Grace and started in to beat her!”

“Mama, you got to stop her! Listen to that child!”

Grace was screaming again. The sound was now coming through a different window.

“Miss Genevieve is chasing her through the house!” said Ivey.

Mary-Love was indecisive. It was her policy to have as little as possible to do with Genevieve Caskey, and it was not Caskey policy either to interfere with the instruction and rearing of children—and children who were reared and instructed properly did sometimes cry.

“If no one else is going to do anything, I will,” said Elinor in disgust. With that she went right through the screen door, down the

side steps, right across the yard, and through James Caskey's front door without a single hesitation in her stride.

Sister, Mary-Love, Ivey, and Zaddie stood all in a line, looking over the camellias, scarcely daring to breathe. Faintly, through the windows of the neighboring house, they heard Elinor's voice, "Grace! Grace!"

In another moment the front door of James Caskey's house opened and Grace Caskey came flying out. She ran directly across the yard and up the side steps. Zaddie ran to her and Grace jumped into the black girl's arms. Zaddie hugged her tight. Mary-Love and Sister pulled the girl away and stared into her face.

"Child," cried Mary-Love, "you are red in the face. You are bruised!"

"Mama hit me!" cried Grace. "Mama hit me with a belt!"

"In the face?" said Mary-Love, unwilling to believe that even of Genevieve Caskey. "Child, she could have put out one of your eyes!"

Zaddie was in the corner conferring in whispers with her older sister. Ivey came forward a moment later and said quietly, "Miss Mary-Love, Zaddie say Miss Genevieve been drinking…"

Mary-Love slowly shook her head, and Sister sat down in the swing and lifted up Grace, putting the child's head in her lap and smoothing down her hair. Holding her hands in front of her face, Grace began to weep. In that position, it could be seen that Grace's underpants had been torn off and that her legs and bottom also bore the marks of Genevieve's belt. Two lines of blood showed where the buckle had torn the flesh of Grace's thigh.

Mary-Love turned and looked across to the Caskey house. What was Elinor saying to Genevieve?

Elinor's head was suddenly thrust out the dining room window. "Zaddie!" she called out.

"Yes'm?" cried out Zaddie.

“You go to the mill and fetch Mr. James—this minute, you hear?”

Elinor’s head disappeared. Zaddie went over to the swing and held Grace’s trembling hand for a moment.

“Go on, child!” cried Mary-Love. “Do as Miss Elinor says!”

Sister took Grace up to her own room, washed her face, and after lowering the blinds and closing the curtains, put Grace onto the bed. She sat at Grace’s side, whispering words of consolation and fanning her face—for the room was stifling and dark—until the child was asleep. Then Sister seated herself in a rocker at the foot of the bed with the fan in one hand and a novel in the other. She wanted to make sure that if the child woke up she wouldn’t find herself alone.

Mary-Love remained on the side porch with Ivey, and the two women watched the house next door with unabated and ungratified interest. They saw nothing; they heard nothing. James drove up in his automobile twenty minutes after Zaddie had left to fetch him. The black girl jumped out of the car first, and James went not to his own house but to his sister-in-law’s. He stood between two great camellias and spoke to Mary-Love.

“James,” said Mary-Love, “did Zaddie tell you what happened?”

He nodded. “Where is Grace?”

“She’s in Sister’s room. And she is gone stay there until—”

“Where is Genevieve?”

“Genevieve and Elinor are over there”—Mary-Love pointed at James’s house—“but what they are saying to each other I have no idea. James, I don’t know if you remember it, but Genevieve once came after me with a broom!”

James did indeed remember it, and didn’t have to be reminded of the circumstance. “What do you suppose Elinor is saying to her?”

“I have no idea,” repeated Mary-Love impatiently, “all I know is you better get on over there.”

James turned and walked reluctantly across the yard toward his own house. But before he got there the front door opened and Elinor came out with two suitcases. She was grim.

“Mr. James,” she said, “put these in the car.”

“Elinor,” he said in a whisper, “did you talk to Genevieve?”

“There’s two more,” said Elinor, and she went back into the house.

Zaddie and James loaded the four suitcases into the car; then came three hat boxes, a jewelry case, and two smaller cases that contained they didn’t know what. They were all in dark blue leather and bore the gold initials, GC. Genevieve herself came last of all, wearing a black dress and a black veil so thick you couldn’t have seen her face if you had walked right up to her and raised a lantern.

“Lord,” cried Ivey in a whisper to Mary-Love, “she must be burning up in there.”

“Who went after who with a broom is what I want to know,” remarked Mary-Love.

Elinor came out of the house after Genevieve and stood before the front door as if guarding it.

“Elinor,” said James, who did not dare to speak to his wife, “where are we going?”

“Over to Atmore. Genevieve’s catching the Hummingbird to Nashville. And, James—you are not going to drive.”

Genevieve was already climbing into the car. If ever a woman’s posture indicated defeat, Mary-Love said to Ivey, that woman’s did.

“Then how’s she gone get there?” demanded James in perplexity. He was greatly relieved that the women were handling this very difficult situation—somehow the women always did—but he wished they had made it a little easier for him to understand the part that had been written for him in this little drama.

“You are going to let Bray drive her, and Zaddie’s going to ride in the back,” replied Elinor.

Hearing that, Ivey ran over to the new house to fetch Bray who was planting camellias and hawthorns in the side yard. He wasn't even allowed to change out of his gardening clothes into his uniform, but got directly into the automobile. With Zaddie in the back and Genevieve silent and stone-still in the front, he took off toward Atmore.

"Bray," called Elinor, "you drive careful! It's going to rain!"

James Caskey looked up at the sky. The accumulated heat of a whole day of blistering sunshine poured down upon him out of a cloudless expanse of white-blue air.

Elinor wouldn't tell what she had said to Genevieve Caskey that persuaded that woman to return to Nashville. And since it had been conjectured that Elinor Caskey was the very reason that Genevieve had stayed in Perdido as long as she had, the mystery seemed even deeper. Elinor would only say, "How you think I could have let her stay around here after what she did to Grace—that poor child! And she didn't even break the lamp!"

James and Elinor went up to Sister's room and stood at the side of Grace's bed. The child still slept soundly.

"That's her way of hiding," said Sister in a low voice. "I do it too."

Back down on the porch Elinor said to James, "I am so sorry. This is my fault."

"Your fault!" cried James. "Not a bit in the world, I—"

"Why you say that?" demanded Mary-Love of her daughter-in-law suspiciously.

"I ought to have seen what Genevieve was capable of. I ought to have got her out of here before what happened today had a chance to happen."

"I wish you had, too," said Mary-Love, "but I will tell you the truth, Elinor. I wouldn't have placed any bets this afternoon when I

saw you go into that house, and Sister and Ivey wouldn't have either."

Elinor waved this away. "Two months ago," she said, "I should have picked her up and put her on that train myself."

"James," said Mary-Love, "it is time to talk about divorce."

"No," said Elinor, interrupting. "Talk about it later. No need to talk about it now."

"Why not now?" demanded Mary-Love. "What better time than now, when that child is lying upstairs with belt marks all over her entire body? James has witnesses right here on this porch."

"Wait till this evening," said Elinor. "Wait till Bray and Zaddie get back and we hear Genevieve's been taken care of."

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The road to Atmore went northeast from Perdido, past the sawmills and through a few hundred acres of pine owned by Tom DeBordenave. It skirted the cypress swamp in which the Blackwater River had its marshy source, then emerged into the vast, flat potato and cotton fields of Escambia County. Atmore was the nearest place to catch the train, though it was such a small town that the trains would stop for passengers only if alerted by a signal from the station-master.

Bray drove along this road rather more quickly than was his wont. He had been warned that Miss Genevieve had to be at the L & N station by five-thirty in order to get her ticket and prepare the stationmaster to stop the Hummingbird. James Cas-key's automobile was a small touring car he had purchased in 1917, a handsome Packard with a metal top and a glass windscreen that Bray drove with much pleasure.

The waning afternoon was still very bright and oppressively warm. Genevieve Caskey sat silently, did not look at Bray or take any

apparent notice of the countryside as they passed through it. Zaddie sat apprehensively in the back seat. Bray, Zaddie knew, had been sent on this errand because Elinor had not wanted to allow Genevieve the opportunity during the ride to "explain things" to James; to excuse her temper on account of the heat or the dullness of the town. And Zaddie knew that she had been sent along to prevent Bray's giving in to any temptation offered by Genevieve not to see her onto that train to Nashville. But Genevieve might as well have been a dummy in the front window of Berta Hamilton's dress shop, for all the explanations or bribes that she proffered.

By the time they reached the cypress swamp, the heat in the automobile had sent Zaddie nearly over into sleep. She sat with her head far back, her eyes closed against the glaring sun in the empty Alabama sky. It burned patterns on her eyelids and she forgot everything but the intense yellow and red that swirled in her brain. But suddenly that yellow and red faded out, and a coolness settled over Zaddie's upturned face. She opened her eyes. A single dark gray cloud had blown across the sun. It wasn't large—probably no bigger than the plot of land on which the Caskey houses were built, Zaddie thought— but it looked very much out of place. Zaddie was certain that five minutes before it hadn't been visible anywhere. And there was another peculiar thing, she realized: solitary clouds were usually much higher in the sky and tended to be wispy, frozen, white. This one was dark, roiling, and it hung low.

She couldn't take her eyes from it. It seemed to be flying directly toward them. Zaddie cowered in the corner of the seat.

Bray had reduced the Packard's speed. Zaddie looked to the front. Not far ahead of them was a great logging truck lumbering slowly along with a full load. It was doubtless headed toward Atmore, where there were two more mills. Long trunks of pine, denuded of branches, protruded far beyond the back of the truck, bobbing up and down with the motion of the vehicle. The longest of these was tied at the end with a red kerchief so that drivers coming up behind could better judge what distance to keep.

Zaddie looked up into the sky again. The cloud had passed over them and gone on ahead.

Then the girl noticed something else strange: the feathery branches of the cypresses in the swamp were not being stirred at all by breezes. They drooped in the heat and were perfectly still; no wind blew the rank grass at the side of the road. Yet just above, that roiling black cloud had fairly flown across the sky.

Not far ahead, the cloud seemed to pause, and as Zaddie watched it began suddenly to pour out rain, as if it were a sponge and God had wrung it. Even Genevieve's head lifted up at this. From the distance —no more than a quarter of a mile—they could see that the rainwater was falling directly onto the road on which they were traveling. Zaddie had never seen anything like it. The sun shone down all around them, and the tops of the trees in the swamp were illuminated in its yellow-white light, yet there was that black solitary cloud spilling pails of rain right onto the highway.

"The devil is beating his wife!" cried Zaddie aloud, as Ivey invariably exclaimed when it rained as the sun was shining.

"Hush, Zaddie!" said Bray. "We got to go right through that."

Just up ahead the road curved a little to the right. It was possible for Bray and Zaddie to see that for a distance of perhaps a hundred yards in front of the truck water from the dark gray cloud was splashing against the macadam of the road.

"That truck don't go faster, we're not gone get you there in time, Miss Genevieve."

Genevieve didn't reply.

The truck ahead, as if in answer to Bray's need for haste, suddenly picked up speed. Zaddie conjectured the driver didn't want to spend any more time than was necessary driving through that peculiar downfall of rainwater.

Bray didn't either. He kept exact pace.

The logging truck drove into the shadow of the cloud. The water poured down and beat on the felled trees, and in the space of two or three seconds the red kerchief on the end of the longest log was soaked and limp. Great waves of water shot up on either side of the truck.

"Bray!" cried Genevieve suddenly, "don't!" She meant don't drive the automobile through that uncanny veil of rainwater.

But it was too late to stop. The Packard itself had now driven into the cloud's stormy venue. Never had the passengers of the car seen so great a downpour in so small an area. The water beat against the roof so loudly that they were deafened. Rain gushed through the windows in sheets and instantly soaked Bray and Zaddie and Genevieve to the skin. It poured so heavily against the windscreen that their vision of the road ahead was completely obscured. In an instant all their senses had been occluded by rain: they saw, heard, tasted, felt, and smelled nothing else.

The Packard skidded to the left, and Bray speeded up a little, trying to regain control. He got control again, but the extra speed was taking the car too close to the truck ahead. The long pine trunk with the red kerchief attached to it was suddenly right there. It dropped onto the front of the Packard, skidded up the hood, and smashed through the windscreen.

Genevieve Caskey had no time even to cry out. She saw a flash of red on the other side of the windscreen, but by the time that fugitive color had registered in her mind, the pine trunk had smashed through, and its jagged, resinous tip—sharp as a pointed spear—had been run through her right eye and out the back of her skull. The impact in fact was so great that her entire head was ripped from her body and thrust into the air over the back seat.

Zaddie looked up and saw Genevieve's impaled head bobbing above her, with rain-diluted blood dripping off the still-attached veil.

The pine trunk that had beheaded Genevieve Caskey had also caught against the interior of the automobile's roof, and so, although

Bray had lost control of the car again, the Packard was pulled right along behind the logging truck. When they were out from beneath the cloud and onto dry road, Bray put on the brakes and at the same time reached up to pull the pine trunk free of the roof.

Unmindful of the accident behind, the driver of the logging truck did not halt his vehicle. While Genevieve Caskey's trunk and body quivered convulsively on the front seat of the Packard, the speared head was drawn right back out through the hole in the shattered windscreen. There it remained impaled all the way to Atmore where it was discovered by two workers who had been sent around to unload the great logs. Neither of them would touch it, but with a stick they worked it off its spear until it dropped into an old orange crate they had placed on the ground underneath.

"See," said Elinor placidly, when they all learned of it, "I said there wasn't any need to talk about James's divorce."

CHAPTER 10
The Caskey Jewels

Everybody in Perdido came to Genevieve's funeral. You couldn't have kept them away if James Caskey himself had stood at the church door with a stack of crisp two-dollar bills and given one out to anyone who would turn right around and go back home without trying to sneak a look at the damaged corpse. People couldn't see much, however, even after they got inside, because the nature of Genevieve's death demanded a closed coffin.

All the Caskeys sat in the front pew on the left. The women were dressed in black with thick veils. Heavy mourning had gone rather out of fashion in the past couple of years. However, the Caskeys were high people in town, and they all had their funeral dresses ready at the back of a closet. Even Grace had a little crushed hat with a heavy veil attached. Many in town thought this affectation, but the veil in fact was to hide the bruises and welts visible on her face, inflicted by the dead woman two days before.

Genevieve's husband wept. His were the only Cas-key tears that morning. Mary-Love and Sister and Elinor didn't even affect sorrow.

In the pew behind Mary-Love sat a man and a woman whom no one had ever seen before. The man, who was tall and ill-favored, coughed a great deal. The woman, who was short and dimpled, wheezed and cooed at a child at her side—a boy about four years old who complained of boredom in an incessant whisper and whistle. No one had to be told that this was Genevieve's family. What little polish Gene-vieve had exhibited—her clothes, her knowledge of the presidents' middle names—was shown up for the sham it had been once you saw this family. They turned out to be Queenie and Carl

Strickland and their son Malcolm. It was with the Stricklands that Genevieve had lived when she was in Nashville.

They had arrived only an hour before the service and they drove away directly from the cemetery. Mary-Love had nodded when she was introduced and Oscar had shaken hands all around. Elinor and Sister had smiled. Everyone had been immensely glad that the Stricklands evaporated before anyone had been driven to the extremity of saying something nice to them about the dead woman.

Genevieve was buried in the town cemetery, which was situated on a piece of high sandy ground west of the workers' houses. This place had fortunately been little affected by the flood. It might be pointed out that the graveyard next to the Bethel Rest Baptist Church in Baptist Bottom had not been so lucky. There, bones and coffin fragments had floated right up to the surface of the earth and were found scattered over several blocks when the waters had receded. Colored women, before they had even stepped inside their own ruined homes, gathered up those bones in croker sacks, and colored men dug a deep grave into which the unidentifiable remains of their parents, wives, children, and friends were once again laid to rest until the next flood should bring them up again.

There were now five graves in the Caskey plot: Elvennia and Roland, James's parents; Randolph, James's brother and Mary-Love's husband; the little girl who had been born Randolph's and James's sister; and now the deep rectangular hole in whose depths Genevieve's severed head and body were casually reunited.

That afternoon, Mary-Love, Elinor, and Sister changed out of their black and went next door to go through Genevieve's things. Her clothing would be portioned out among the three of them—according to fit, principally. What would fit none of them would be given to Roxie and Ivey. (If Queenie Strickland had remained in Perdido, as everyone had feared she might, she would have received a portion of this wardrobe, though as Mary-Love remarked, referring to Queenie's height, "She'd have to take up all the hems about two feet.") All Genevieve's bags had been removed from the wrecked

Packard and brought back to the house. While Elinor and Sister began taking things out of the suitcases, Mary-Love opened the smaller bags. Two contained cosmetics, but Mary-Love couldn't find the one in which Genevieve had kept her jewels.

"They were Elvennia's things," said Mary-Love. "They should have come to me. But Elvennia left them to James—I don't know what she supposed he was going to do with them." The truth was, and Sister at least knew it, that Mary-Love hadn't got along with her mother-in-law and Elvennia had left the jewels to her son out of pure spite. "I just hope," said Mary-Love earnestly, "that no one came along and took the bag out of the automobile while it was sitting out there on the highway."

"What sort of jewelry did Genevieve have?" Elinor asked, holding up a fine linen skirt to her waist.

"Diamonds, mostly. Not big ones, but lots of them. In good settings, too. Ruby earrings. Emerald earrings. Bracelets. She didn't wear them a lot, but she always took them with her."

"Mama, you know why, too," said Sister. "She was afraid you'd come over and steal 'em!"

"I would have!" cried Mary-Love. "Who do you think took care of Elvennia Caskey when she was so sick? James didn't know what to do with her. And then that old woman had the nerve to go and leave James every damn one of those things!"

Elinor looked up: she had never before heard Mary-Love swear.

"After Elvennia's funeral," Mary-Love went on, "I said to James, 'James, you ought to give those things to me—I have earned them.' James wouldn't do it, though. He said it was his mama's wish that he should get them and he kept 'em. I still haven't forgiven him. Not for that. I said, 'James, just let me have the pearls.' And he wouldn't even do that."

"There were pearls?" said Elinor with interest.

“Black pearls,” said Mary-Love. “Most beautiful things you ever saw. Three sets of double strands, fixed so you could wear them all at once. Genevieve could have kept all the diamonds and rubies and sapphires—people around here, after all, don’t wear much but their wedding rings—but I could have worn those pearls anytime, anywhere. At least the smallest strand, I could have worn that one to church. And the thing was, Genevieve didn’t like ‘em. She wouldn’t wear ‘em ‘cause they were black! She carried ‘em everywhere, and I was dying for those pearls.”

“I like pearls best,” said Elinor quietly.

“Sapphires are my favorite,” said Sister. “But I’ve only got this little baby ring, which I got for being the first grandchild. Mama, maybe you ought to ask James if he knows where that case is.”

Mary-Love had been counting undergarments and dividing them according to quality. She draped five silk underskirts over the back of a chair and said, “I’m gone do just that. We ought to find out what happened to those things—that jewelry is valuable.”

Elinor and Sister continued to unpack the dead woman’s things. Mary-Love returned in about ten minutes. She stood in the door with a dumbfounded expression on her face, one hand behind her back.

“Mama,” said Sister without looking up, “did James know where that case was?”

Mary-Love drew her hand around in front of her; she was holding Genevieve’s jewelry case by a handle on its side. The other two women turned to look at Mary-Love. She unfastened the latch and the top fell open. An empty velvet-lined tray dropped to the floor, but absolutely nothing else was in it.

“Mama?” cried Sister. “Where is the jewelry?”

Mary-Love looked at her daughter, then at her daughter-in-law. She deliberately allowed the case to fall to the floor. The jolt unhinged the lid.

“James buried it,” she said after a moment. “He put it all in Genevieve’s coffin.”

James Caskey had been more disturbed by his wife’s death than anyone knew. He blamed himself for having sent her away—away to her death, as it turned out. He blamed himself for not having driven the Packard to Atmore himself—for then he might have perished in her place.

Oscar pointed out that, following this general line of reasoning, James might more logically blame Elinor and Bray for Genevieve’s death. Elinor had sent Genevieve away; Bray’s driving had, perhaps, caused the accident. But James didn’t see it that way and took the guilt upon himself. It was for this reason, in partial expiation of his unintentional but fatal sin, that he buried with Genevieve all the jewelry he had inherited from his mother.

He looked surprised, in fact, when Mary-Love confronted him in her vast astonishment and indignation.

“But, Mary-Love,” he protested weakly, “what on earth was I going to do with that jewelry? *I* wasn’t gone wear it. And I have given every speck of it to Genevieve…”

Mary-Love sighed deeply. She had got James alone. They were the oldest surviving generation of Caskeys, and there were scenes and decisions to which they alone should be privy. For this she wouldn’t have her son or her daughter by her.

“James,” said Mary-Love, “who is in the next room, crying on the bed?”

“Grace,” said James. The child’s sobbing was audible through the wall.

“What is Grace?” asked Mary-Love, staring at her brother-in-law hard in the face. “Is Grace a little girl?”

“She is.”

“Well, James, Grace is going to grow up, and when Grace grows up, she could have worn that jewelry. That jewelry—which in the first place ought to have come to me—could have gone to Grace. James, you foolish man, you could have divided up that jewelry—it’s all Caskey jewelry after all. There would have been some for me and some for Sister and some for Elinor and a whole safety-deposit box full of it for Grace. You could even have sent Queenie Strickland away with a pair of earrings. .Everybody could have benefited.”

James looked very troubled. “Mary-Love,” he said, “I didn’t think of it.”

“I know you didn’t. And even if you had thought about it you wouldn’t have done it! I have a good mind to give Bray a shovel and tell him to go out there and dig Genevieve right out of the ground!”

James Caskey trembled. “Oh, Mary-Love, please don’t do that!” he said. But Mary-Love would not give him the satisfaction of a promise not to do that very thing.

Genevieve’s grave was not dug up, and Mary-Love forbade the subject of family jewelry to be mentioned again—it was too painful a loss. No one could believe that James Caskey had simply thrown away a easeful of jewels that couldn’t be purchased now for any sum less than about thirty-eight thousand dollars. Mary-Love had long been in the habit of purchasing stones for investment and knew their value.

One morning in October Ivey was in the kitchen preparing the noontime meal. Since Genevieve’s death six weeks earlier James and Grace had started having all their meals with Mary-Love and there was very little for Roxie to do all day, so she had taken to sitting out her morning with Ivey and Zad-die in Mary-Love’s kitchen. “Oh, look at that!” cried Ivey, leaning over the stove.

“What you see?” asked Roxie.

“I’m looking at the ‘tatoes.”

“Have they got bugs?”

“Oh, no,” said Ivey, “but I never saw the water boil away from ‘tatoes so fast. That means it’s gone rain today!”

“I don’t see no clouds,” remarked Roxie, planting both feet firmly upon the floor and leaning far to the left in her straw chair in order to peer up at the sky through the kitchen window nearest her.

“I’m not never wrong,” said Ivey. “Not when it comes to reading ‘tatoes.”

And Ivey wasn’t wrong. The clouds moved in at about noon, and the rain began to fall an hour later. James and Oscar, on their way back to the mill from dinner, were caught out in it, and stopped at the barbershop for shelter and, as long as they were there, hair cuts.

At first it hadn’t seemed that the rain was going to be heavy, but the intensity of the falling water quickly increased, churning the muddy Perdido, splashing heavy gray sand onto the trunks of the water oaks in the yard, and keeping everyone indoors who hadn’t some overwhelming necessity to be out. And since the town wasn’t the get-up-and-go kind of place that produced overwhelming necessities in its inhabitants, everyone stayed inside. Out in the pine forests the mill workers took shelter in the logging cabins or beneath a cedar (the tree which provides best shelter in such downpours). Children huddled on back porches and watched the rain with awe, for in Perdido, rain may fall very hard indeed. The grounds around the Caskey houses were awash. Grace and Zaddie sat on the back steps of James Caskey’s house and fashioned paper boats which they tossed into a large pool that had formed right in back of the kitchen. There was not a great deal of amusement in this occupation, however, since the rain immediately flattened the boats into soggy masses of pulp.

And at the cemetery, the rain beat down upon Genevieve Caskey’s grave. It overturned the pots in which flowers had been placed every day by James Caskey. It tore the petals from the flowers and beat the petals into the earth—as if to deliver James’s homage all the way down to his dead wife. In the space of only a little time the mound of

earth that covered Genevieve's grave was washed away, and the earth was as flat as it had been when Genevieve was alive and had no thought of this narrow home. But the earth over a grave is loose, and the rain tamped it down. Soon there was a depression in the earth above Genevieve's coffin, a depression that quickly filled with water, and as the water sank down into the earth more water fell from the sky to replenish the pool. This soon sank into the earth as well, and after a time it would have been apparent to anyone who might have been around to look at Genevieve's grave that James Caskey's wife—jewels and all—was not only dead, but also very, very wet.

Mary-Love and Sister were caught over at the new house where they were measuring the back parlor windows for curtains. Since the house had been completed, Mary-Love's strategy had changed. She had no intention of allowing Oscar to leave her of his own volition, even when that meant continuing to share a house with Elinor. Now that Genevieve was dead, all Mary-Love's antagonism was turned toward her daughter-in-law. The fact that she was able to keep Oscar by her when it was inconvenient and onerous for Oscar to remain, and when there was a large house next door empty and waiting, only showed Elinor that Mary-Love's hold over Oscar was much stronger than her own. Mary-Love had declared that she could not allow them to take possession until she was herself satisfied. And satisfaction, Mary-Love contentedly mused to herself, was a thing that might be put off indefinitely. The principal rooms "had long been furnished, and now sheets protected these pieces from dust. The place was dark and silent, for the water and electricity had not yet been turned on.

On all four sides of the house, rainwater dropped in a heavy curtain from the high roof, digging neat troughs next to the new flower beds Bray had put in.

"Sister," said Mary-Love, looking apprehensively at the density of water through which they'd have to pass to get home, "do you have something to cover your head?"

"Let's just wait here till it's over," Sister suggested. "It cain't keep up long like this."

Mary-Love acquiesced, for it hardly seemed worth the soaking to return home without cover. The two women finished their measuring, and, after drawing back and carefully folding the sheets which had covered it, seated themselves on the new sofa in the front parlor. Sister opened the draperies here, hung only the week before, and they watched for some sign of slackening off of the downpour.

The sound of the rain was hypnotic, and though it was only October the air was somehow chill. The house, which had been built to let in lots of light and air, seemed gloomy, dark, and inhospitable.

“Mama,” said Sister, “maybe we should light a fire…”

“Go ahead,” said Mary-Love. “Have you got any matches? Have you got kindling? Have you got a scuttle of coal?”

“No,” said Sister.

“Well, then, go right ahead,” said Mary-Love, hugging herself tighter.

Almost imperceptibly, during this small exchange, the rain had diminished.

Sister lifted her chin suddenly. “Mama, you hear something?”

“I hear the rain.”

“I mean something in the house,” Sister whispered. “I hear something in the house.”

“I don’t hear anything. You hear the rain splashing on the porch, that’s what you hear.”

“Mama, no, I heard something else.”

Something dropped to the floor in the room directly above them.

“See!” cried Sister, and jumped nearer her mother on the sofa. “There’s somebody up there.”

“No, there’s not!” said Mary-Love firmly, but somehow without complete conviction.

They sat silent, listening. The rain continued to slacken, but it was very far from stopping.

Faintly, they heard a metallic jangle, soft and distant. What was it like? It was like hearing Grace opening her piggy bank on the bed in the next room.

Mary-Love rose, but Sister tried to pull her back.

“Sister,” said her mother sternly, “there is nobody in this house. A squirrel got in. Or maybe a bat. Or the water is leaking through the new roof. Do you know what that roof cost me? I am going upstairs and see and you are coming with me.”

Sister dared not refuse. There was a louder jangle. Mary-Love went out into the hall and started up the stairs. Sister followed, pinching a pleat in the back of Mary-Love’s skirt. “It came from that front bedroom,” said Mary-Love.

They paused on the landing and looked up to the second-floor hallway. All the doors were shut and the hallway itself was dark and dim. At the end, a door inset with squares of stained glass opened onto a narrow porch. The glass glowed richly in vermilion and cobalt and chartreuse, but the light wasn’t strong enough to illuminate the dark carpet on the floor.

There was another jangle.

Sister shuddered and grabbed her mother’s arm.

“Mama, that’s not a bat!”

Mary-Love went resolutely up the stairs. She didn’t hesitate, but advanced directly to the end of the hallway, stepping loudly on the carpeted floor in order to give warning to whatever was inside that front room. At the end of the hall she veered suddenly to the left and knocked on the wall next to the door; then she knocked on the door itself.

At first there was silence within, then a soft thump, and almost immediately after, another jangle.

Sister, who had dragged along behind, caught her breath in gasps. “Oh, Mama,” she pleaded in a whisper, “don’t open that door.”

Mary-Love turned the knob and pushed open the door of the front room. It slowly swung wide to reveal a square dark chamber with thick curtains over the windows. The suite of furniture here had been the first purchased for the house, and it had lain under sheets longer than any other. The room was painted a dark green. Mary-Love and Sister could see nothing but the outlines of the walnut bed, the dresser, the dresser mirror, the chifforobe, and the chest of drawers. The two women stood absolutely still outside the door listening for another jangle, another thump, watching for some movement in the darkened room.

Something flashed in the corner of the ceiling directly above the chifforobe. Immediately thereafter there was a loud thump. Sister cried out.

“What was it?” demanded Mary-Love, who had been looking in another direction.

“Something on the ceiling! It was on the ceiling!”

“What was it?”

“I don’t know!” Mama, pull that door closed and let’s get out of here.”

“We cain’t see anything with those curtains closed. Sister, go pull those draperies aside.”

“Mama! I’m not going in there! There’s something in there!”

“It’s a bat,” said Mary-Love, “and I’ll have to kill it. But I have to be able to see it first.”

“Bats don’t shine!”

There was another flash, immediately followed by a jangle.

Sister screamed, whirled around, and ran down the hallway.

Mary-Love looked after her daughter for a moment, then walked resolutely across the room to pull open the draperies. “Sister!” she called as she jerked aside the fabric. She turned around but just as she did so, out of the corner of her eye she saw another flash up near the ceiling, and then felt something heavy and sharp strike the crown of her head. She heard a thud as it hit the floor.

Sister appeared timorously in the doorway. Mary-Love stooped and picked up whatever it was that had struck her.

“Mama, what is it?” asked Sister fearfully.

Mary-Love held it up in the light. “It’s a sapphire ring,” she said. Then after a moment she grimly added, “Your grandmama wore this ring on the third finger of her right hand.”

Sister screamed and pointed up into the corner of the room. Right above the chifforobe, protruding from the plaster of the ceiling, was a narrow glinting band of jewels. It looked as though it were being squeezed out, as potatoes might be extruded through a ricer. The bracelet dangled there an instant, then dropped with a little clatter and jangle onto the top of the chifforobe. Mary-Love went over and picked it up. The bracelet was made up of seven rubies, each surrounded by small round white diamonds. “Elven-nia wore this to my wedding,” said Mary-Love. Also on top of the chifforobe was a ring mounted with three quite good-sized diamonds.

“Mama,” whispered Sister, pointing at the bed.

There, on top of the protective sheet, lay a small jumble of jewelry.

“Mama,” said Sister, “this stuff is coming through the ceiling!”

“Sister, shhh!” With an unhappy puzzled brow, Mary-Love squeezed the bracelet and two rings in her hand until she felt the facets of the jewels pressing into her flesh. “Sister,” she whispered, “these are all the things that James buried in Genevieve’s coffin.”

Sister bit her lip and began to back toward the door.

“Mama,” she said, almost in tears, “how did it get here, how…”

A brooch of rubies and emeralds dropped from the ceiling onto the center of the bed, adding to the pile there.

It was too much even for Mary-Love. “Get out, get out, get out!” she cried and waved Sister toward the door. Sister turned to run.

The door slammed shut.

Two more rings were flung out of the ceiling and hit Sister on the back of her head. She dropped to her knees and cried out in fear.

Mary-Love stumbled past her daughter to the door and tried to jerk it open. The knob rattled in her hands. The door was locked.

“Mama!” Sister screamed. “It’s locked!”

“No, it’s not!” cried Mary-Love. “No, it’s not, it’s just stuck.”

Sister looked up. Another bracelet popped out from the ceiling, this one from a different place than before, and after a dangling moment it fell draped over the edge of the dresser mirror.

Mary-Love reached down and drew her daughter up. Sister whimpered.

Not knowing what else to do, and more bewildered than she had ever been in her life, Mary-Love pulled open the door of the closet in that room. It was a small door, smaller than any other door in the house, and Mary-Love couldn’t remember why it had been constructed so much out of proportion. It swung open. The closet was empty except for a solitary black dress on a hanger. Pinned to the lapel was a black veil, that even as Mary-Love stared at it began to drip a dark mixture of blood and rainwater onto the floor of the closet.

She slammed the closet door shut.

Sister clung to her mother still. Mary-Love pushed her away and went back to the hallway door. Perhaps it had been only stuck, swollen with the damp and caught in the jamb. She pulled hard at the knob. Nothing. Mary-Love drew back, biting her lips to keep from crying out in frustration and fear. ” The door swung open.

Elinor Caskey stood there in the hallway. She was wearing a green dress that had belonged to Gene-vieve and the smallest of the three ropes of Gene-vieve's black pearls clasped around her neck.

"Doors get stuck in wet weather," said Elinor.

Sister, gasping, cried out, "Oh, Elinor, Mama and I were so scared! We thought that somebody had locked us in!"

"We did not," said Mary-Love stiffly, beginning to recover a bit from her fright, and now very much interested in the pearls around Elinor's neck. "We just thought that the door had stuck…like you said."

Sister glanced at her mother, but did not contradict her. "But why are you here? Did you hear us call? Is that why you came over?"

"No," said Elinor with a little smile, "I came over for a different reason. I had a little bit of news."

"What is it?" said Mary-Love quickly.

"Oh, Elinor, cain't it wait for a few minutes? I want to get home!" cried Sister.

"Yes," said Elinor, "it can wait. But I think we probably ought to gather up all these things." She went past Mary-Love and Sister to the bed and began to slip the jewels into the pockets of her dress. Mary-Love rushed over and filled her pockets, too.

CHAPTER 11
Elinor's News

Later that afternoon, when the rain had diminished to just a drip from awnings over the windows, Sister recovered behind the closed door of her room and Mary-Love and Elinor calmly deliberated about Gen-evieve's recovered jewelry. Strangely enough, no mention was made by either woman of the inexplicable manner of the return of the gems, except by inference. It was decided right off that James could never be allowed to see them en masse, for he would be certain to recognize his mother's and his wife's jewelry. Mary-Love would keep the three rings that she liked best, she would hold out two sapphire and diamond bracelets for Sister, and the remainder would be put aside in a safety-deposit box in Mobile for Grace's majority. "By then," said Mary-Love, "James may be dead, or he may have lost his memory and we won't have a problem about giving things to Grace. I suppose," she went on delicately, "that you ought to keep the pearls, Elinor."

"I suppose I will," Elinor replied.

Of all the jewelry that had been buried in Gene-vieve's casket, only the black pearls had not materialized from the ceiling of the upper room of the new house, and even in her great fear and greater wonder, Mary-Love's iron-trap mind had closed on that fact. But she had seen one strand of the pearls around Elinor's neck, and she more than suspected that the other two strands were in Elinor's possession. Mary-Love of course had wanted those pearls for herself —they were the most valuable of all, as well as the most beautiful and useful of the jewels— but Mary-Love, even as she conveniently suppressed thoughts about the inexplicable manner of the return of the jewels, yet credited the fact of their recovery somehow to Elinor.

And if Elinor had brought the jewels—Sister, don't ask how, it won't do for us to know—why then, Elinor ought to have her pick of the lot.

After this conference, Mary-Love never mentioned what she had seen in the house next door. She had no wish to dig out its meaning. When Sister came to her and in whispers demanded to know what it was all about and wanted five reasons why that house should not be burned to the ground this very minute, Mary-Love said only, "Sister, we got Elven-nia's things back and that's all I care about. But I tell you what I'm gone do, I'm gone send Bray over there first thing tomorrow with a broom and tell him to kill all those bats that are up there in that room."

"Bats!" cried Sister, so angered by her mother's stubborn obtuseness that she couldn't bring herself to speak another civil word and walked right out of the room.

Though Mary-Love perhaps convinced herself that there were bats in the front bedroom of the house next door, she did not return to make certain that all the jewelry had been gathered up, or to see if it had really been blood dripping from the dress and veil hanging in the closet.

That evening, after supper, the three women went out and sat on the side porch, watched the moon rise, and waited for Oscar to return from the town council meeting.

"Elinor!" blurted Sister suddenly. "This afternoon you said you had some news, but you never told us what it was. I forgot all about it."

"I did too," said Mary-Love. It was apparent she had not, but had only been reluctant to seem interested or curious.

"I went to see Dr. Benquith this afternoon. It looks as if I'm pregnant," said Elinor calmly.

Mary-Love was for once unrestrained. She got up from the swing and went over and hugged Elinor close. Sister wasn't far behind.

“Oh, Elinor!” cried Mary-Love. “You have just made me a happy woman! You are gone give me a grandchild!”

“Go tell James,” Sister urged. “I see his lights are on. James will be so happy!”

“No,” said Elinor, “I have to tell Oscar first.”

“You told us,” argued Sister.

“That’s different,” said Mary-Love. “You and I are women. James is a man. Elinor is right. James has no business finding out about it before Oscar.”

“Could you tell Grace? She’s a girl.”

Mary-Love shook her head. “Sister, I am sometimes surprised at what you do not know. Women find things out first, then they tell the men—otherwise the men wouldn’t find out anything—then the servants find out, and the children last of all. And sometimes children don’t ever find things out, even after they’ve grown up. There are secrets that die. Sister, I shouldn’t have to be telling you any of this. These are things you should know!”

“Well, I don’t,” said Sister sullenly. “I guess that’s why I’m never gone get married.”

“Don’t say that,” said Mary-Love with some severity. “When you get ready…”

Oscar’s automobile pulled up before the house.

“You want us to go inside?” Mary-Love whispered, but Elinor shook her head no.

“All I’m going to do is tell him,” said Elinor easily. “There’s no reason for you not to be here.”

Oscar came up onto the front porch and was about to go inside the house, but Elinor called, “Oscar, we’re out here!”

Oscar came around. “Hey, y’all,” he said, “sure is a pretty night. All the clouds cleared away.”

“Oscar,” said Elinor without preamble, “I’m going to have a baby.”

Oscar stood stock-still, then he grinned. “Elinor, I’m so happy. But what I want to know is, is it gone be a boy or a girl?”

“You’ll take whatever you get,” said Mary-Love.

“Which do you want?” asked Sister.

“I want a girl,” said Oscar, sitting down and putting his arm around his wife’s shoulder.

“Well, Oscar, you are in luck today, because that’s what it’s going to be.” Elinor stated this not as a matter of belief or conjecture, but rather as if it had been a matter of choice, just as she might have said, I’m going to buy a pink dress, rather than I’m going to get a blue one.

“How you know?” demanded Sister, who that day had come to feel that there was entirely too much about life she did not understand.

“Shhh!” said Mary-Love. “I think it’ll be wonderful to have a little girl baby in the house!”

Elinor’s announcement completely overshadowed the little agenda of news that Oscar brought with him from the town council meeting, and they didn’t hear it until the next morning at breakfast. A third man was to be added to the town police force; the Palafox Street merchants had agreed to bear half the expense of new concrete sidewalks; and finally, an engineer from Montgomery, whose name was Early Haskew, had put up at the Osceola the previous afternoon, had introduced himself to the town council (“a real nice man, and good looking,” remarked Oscar, hardly satisfying his mother’s desire for a detailed description), and would today begin his survey of Perdido.

“Surveying for what?” asked Sister.

“Well, for the levee of course,” said Oscar. Elinor put down her fork with a clatter.

Oscar knew nothing about pregnancy except that it required nine months. So he calculated the birth of his daughter nine months from the day Elinor told him he was going to be a father, as if she had been impregnated the night before and somehow knew it. He was overjoyed to learn that he would have to wait only seven months—his daughter (of that he was certain, for Elinor had said it) would be born in May.

That night, while Elinor was undressing and Oscar was rising from his prayers at the side of the bed, he said, “Elinor, I think you ought to give up the school.”

“I won’t do it,” returned Elinor.

“You’re pregnant!”

“Oscar,” she said, “do you think that I want to sit in this house all day long with Miss Mary-Love perched on one shoulder and Sister perching on the other?”

“No,” he admitted, “I suspect you wouldn’t be partial to that.”

“Oscar,” said Elinor, going over and drawing back the curtain so that the moon could shine into the room, “it is time we moved into our new house.” She raised the screen and leaned out the window. Looking to her left, she could see the house that had been built for her: large, square, and stolid, rising from a pitted lake of shining sand, with the dark pine forest sighing softly behind it.

“Oscar,” Elinor went on, “that house was our wedding present. We have been married for six months and we are still living in the room you had as a little boy. Every time I hang up a dress I see your old toys in the back of the closet—they’re still there, and I don’t have anywhere to put my shoes! The house next door has sixteen rooms and not a single person in any one of them.” She got into bed.

“Mama will be lonesome when we go,” Oscar ventured.

“Mama will have Sister,” snapped Elinor. “Mama will be able to look out her window—without even getting out of her bed—and see if we are up and stirring in the morning. Mama can lean out the back

door and shake her mop in my face. Oscar, we're not going to the end of the earth. We're moving thirty yards away. And what you got to remember is, I'm going to have a baby. We're going to need that house."

"I know it," said Oscar uncomfortably. "And I'll talk to Mama." A thought suddenly occurred to him. He turned on his pillow and looked into his wife's face. "Elinor, let me ask you something. Did you get pregnant just so we could move out of this house?"

"I would do anything to get you out of this house, Oscar. I would go to any length," replied Elinor, then turned over and went to sleep.

Oscar talked to Mary-Love, but she wouldn't hear of his leaving her. Mary-Love objected that the house wasn't furnished yet; Mary-Love declared that there were bats upstairs and Bray hadn't been able to kill them; Mary-Love pointed out that before Oscar and Elinor moved into the house, she'd have to find them at least two colored women to work there, and every decent colored woman in Perdido was already taken. Elinor was pregnant and shouldn't have to run a house all by herself, going up and down stairs all day, worrying about linens and cushions. And to make certain that Elinor and Oscar did not move one day when she was out of the house for a few hours—in remembrance and imitation of the circumstances of their wedding—Mary-Love made surreptitious visits to the water board and the Alabama Gas and Power Company and forced them to promise not to turn on the water, electricity, and gas before she gave her written consent.

Oscar gave in. "I cain't fight Mama," he told his wife with a despairing sigh. "She's always got one more argument than I have. And Lord, Elinor, the only thing she wants in this world is to take care of you while you are pregnant! I don't know why you don't sit back and enjoy it!"

"There is not room to sit back in this house, we are so cramped!"

"There is enough room here," said Oscar mildly. "Elinor, we will go next door just as soon as our little girl is born. Listen, you know

that little room behind the kitchen?"

"I know the one you mean."

"I was thinking we might put up a cot in there and make Zaddie sleep there all the time. Keep you company, keep care of our little girl. Zaddie loves you to death, and I know she'd like nothing more in the world than to come live with us."

This was a large concession. If that innocent and salutary arrangement came to pass, Zaddie Sapp would be the only black in the entire length and breadth of Baldwin County—the largest, though not the most populous county in the entire state—to live in a white household.

"I think that's a good idea," said Elinor with a grimace, "but, Oscar, let me tell you something. I'm not won over. I'm not going to let you buy me off with promises about Zaddie's sleeping arrangements. I think we ought to go next door, and I think we ought to go next door tonight!"

"There aren't even any sheets on the bed!"

"I will go to Caroline DeBordenave and borrow them if I have to!" cried Elinor.

"We cain't do it," said Oscar.

"You can't do it," Elinor corrected. "You can't go against Miss Mary-Love. That's all."

"Then you talk to her," said Oscar. "You stand up to her."

"It's not my place," said Elinor. "I refuse to be accused for the rest of my life of taking you away from Miss Mary-Love."

So Elinor and Oscar remained in Mary-Love Cas-key's house for the entire term of Elinor's pregnancy. Despite Mary-Love's remonstrances, Elinor still rowed Bray's little green boat to the school every morning with Grace perched in the prow, and she didn't miss a day for sickness. Mary-Love and Sister knitted baby clothes and went to Mobile to pick out a set of nursery furniture. Ominously,

however, when this suite was delivered, Mary-Love had it placed not next door, but in a spare bedroom of her own home. When Oscar returned from the mill that afternoon, Elinor took him upstairs, opened the door of that room, and pointed at the wicker bassinet that was still wrapped in brown paper—but she didn't say a word.

"When the time comes," Oscar promised in a low voice, "I will put down my foot."

The time came sooner than anyone expected. After school, on the twenty-first day of March, Grace Cas-key stood on the mooring dock while Elinor tied the boat to the iron ring of the outermost piling. Grace gave Elinor a hand and helped her up onto the weathered pine planks of the dock. This was an awkward operation on account of Elinor's extended belly. Elinor put her hand to her forehead, closed her eyes a moment, and said, "Grace, will you do something for me?"

Grace said, "Yes, ma'am."

Elinor said, "Go tell Roxie to fetch the doctor. Then run over to Miss Mary-Love's and have Ivey turn down my bed."

Grace hesitated. "Are you sick?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Grace," said Elinor with a weak smile, "I am about to have my little girl!"

Grace ran off, as excited as she had been on the day that Miss Elinor got married.

Two hours later, Elinor Caskey—with Sister holding her left hand and Ivey Sapp holding her right and Mary-Love mopping her brow—was delivered of a three-pound little girl. The child was so small that for two months she had to be carried around the house in the hollow of a feather pillow. By Elinor's decree and Oscar's consent, she was to be called Miriam Dammert Caskey.

CHAPTER 12
The Hostage

Miriam didn't look like Elinor; she took after Oscar and all the other Caskeys. This fact alone would have endeared her to Mary-Love, even had Miriam not been the first of her grandchildren. She had the Cas-key hair, hair that was no color at all, and the Caskey nose, which wasn't quite straight but certainly couldn't have been said to be hooked or bulbous or too little or too extreme in its formation or size.

Miriam had been born on Monday. Zaddie took a note to Miz Digman's house that evening to say Elinor wouldn't be at school the following morning, but hoped to return on Wednesday. And Elinor did return on Wednesday, though Mary-Love cried in protest, "You are leaving your two-day-old baby alone!"

"Not exactly alone," remarked Elinor. "In this house there are you and Sister here and Ivey. Next door are Zaddie and Roxie. If the five of you can't and was about to dip her fingers into the water to sprinkle the infant's head, when she stopped in consternation.

Oscar looked down into the basin. The water that filled it was muddy and red.

The preacher whispered: "Oscar, I don't know how…"

"Go ahead!" Elinor said with a smile. "It's just old Perdido water."

The preacher gingerly dipped her fingers in the water and flicked it over Miriam's brow. The child smiled up at her mother.

After the service the family all had dinner together at Mary-Love's, and in honor of the occasion everyone remained in his Sunday clothes. As the ham was going around in one direction and a

plate of ground-beef patties in the other, Elinor said: “School is over in one week and two days.”

“I know you must be glad,” said James. “I know it’s hot up there in that classroom—you got the sun shining in all afternoon long.”

“That’ll be on Tuesday week,” went on Elinor, unmindful of the interruption. “And I got to be there on Wednesday to check in books. So Thursday week,” she said, looking up and all around the table, “Oscar and Miriam and I will be moving in the new house…”

Hell broke loose. Sister was so upset that she didn’t eat another bite. Mary-Love in her distress attacked her plate and consumed in a few moments twice what she normally would have eaten in the course of an entire day. Oscar pleaded, “Oh, y’all, please, let’s talk about this later.” James sent Grace out of the room. Ivey and Roxie stood listening on the other side of the kitchen door.

“I’m not going to say a word about it,” said Elinor. “There is nothing to talk about. That house next door is Oscar’s and mine and we intend to move into it.

That house was our wedding present and it is just sitting there with sheets all over the furniture!”

“Oh, who cores about that old place!” exclaimed Mary-Love, though she spoke of the largest and most expensively built house in the whole town. “We’re talking about Miriam! You cain’t carry that child over there!”

“Why not?” demanded Elinor.

“Who’s gone take care of her?” wailed Sister.

“*I* intend to,” snapped Elinor.

“You don’t know how!” cried Mary-Love. “Oscar, I forbid you to move your child out of this house. Miriam would shrivel up and die!”

Miriam lay in a small crib in the adjoining room. Mary-Love rose precipitately and ran and picked the child up, comforting her and promising in whispers that she would never leave her grandmother.

Sister got up too and caressed the baby as Mary-Love rocked it in her arms.

“Every one of you can go on about this for as long as you want,” said Elinor. “But Oscar and I are going to leave this house.”

“Why?” cried Mary-Love. “Why do you want to leave this house?”

“Because I can’t stand it here!” said Elinor savagely from the table. “I am sick to my death of looking out the window every morning and seeing that great big house next door that’s supposed to be mine, except you keep it locked and you hide the keys from me! I am sick to death of tripping over you and Sister every time I want to look at my own child! I am sick to death of having my closets filled with dead people’s clothes! I am sick of having to report every little movement I make—where I’m going, what I’m doing, and who I’m doing it with. It’ll be bad enough to live right next door, with you and Sister waltzing in at every hour of the day, but at least there I can put hooks up so that you have to knock. Oscar is my husband, and Miriam is my baby, that is our house! And that is the reason Oscar and I are moving out!”

“Elinor,” said Oscar, in despair.

“Oscar,” said Mary-Love wildly, “you are not leaving this house with this darling child! You are not gone let that woman have the care and feeding of this precious infant!”

“Mama, if Elinor feels—”

“Elinor doesn’t feel!” cried Mary-Love, swinging the baby back and forth in her arms with such energy that Sister placed herself to catch Miriam should she be accidentally hurled out of that embrace. “That’s the whole point. She’s not a mother to this child! Sister and I are! You will be ruining this child if you take her away from us!”

Elinor sat still with an expression of disgust on her face. She pushed away her plate. “Ivey,” she called out, “come on in here and clear off—nobody feels like eating any more!”

Ivey came in with Zaddie behind her to clear off the table. In normal circumstances no one would have said a word before the servants—even though everyone was certain that those in the kitchen had heard every word—but these were not normal circumstances, and Mary-Love went on above the clatter of plates and silverware and glasses. “Oscar,” she said in a low, awful voice, “I forbid you to leave this house with Miriam.”

“Mama,” said Oscar plaintively, “you promised Elinor and I could leave as soon as Miriam was born. And ‘cause Miriam was so puny, Elinor was sweet enough—”

Here Mary-Love snorted in contempt.

“—to stay on for a few months and let you help take care of her. But now school’s over and Elinor’s gone be home all the time.”

“What about the fall?” demanded Mary-Love. “What’s gone happen in September? Is Elinor gone hang Miriam on a hook on the porch while she’s down at the school?”

“I’m not going back to teaching,” said Elinor quietly. “Edna McGhee doesn’t like Tallahassee after all. I told her she could have the fourth grade back.”

“Doesn’t matter!” cried Mary-Love desperately. “You’re not gone have this child!”

“We are leaving this house,” said Elinor calmly.

Mary-Love handed the infant to Sister, who held Miriam close to her breast as if to protect her from the violence of Mary-Love’s and Elinor’s words. Mary-Love advanced to the table and stood behind her chair, grasping the back with white-knuckled fingers. “Go on then,” cried Mary-Love, “go next door with my blessing. I’ll give you the keys today. Sister, go get the keys! I’ll give you those keys this very minute and you can move over there this afternoon. I’ll give you candles and a kerosene lamp and Zaddie will fetch you water. Tomorrow, I’ll have the electricity and water and gas turned on. Ivey will carry over your clothes.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Elinor coldly.

“Oh, thank you, Mama—” Oscar began.

“Miriam stays here,” said Mary-Love decisively.

There was a moment of terrible silence.

“Mary-Love—” began James Caskey in a choked whisper.

She cut him off. “You get the house, Elinor— that’s what you want. I get that baby—that’s what I want.”

“Mama, you cain’t—”

“Oscar, you be quiet!” said Mary-Love. “What has this got to do with you, I’d like to know!”

“Well, for one thing, Miriam is my little girl!”

“Miriam belongs to Sister and me!”

Sister brought the keys to the new house. She was still holding the baby. Miriam waved her arms about for attention. Sister buried her nose against the baby’s neck and rubbed it there until Miriam laughed aloud.

Ivey came back in and was taking away the last few glasses from the center of the table. “Ivey,” said Elinor, “as soon as you’re done, go upstairs and start packing my things, would you please?”

“Be glad to, Miss Elinor,” said Ivey in a low voice, not looking at anyone else in the room.

Mary-Love smiled triumphantly.

Oscar, shocked, turned to his wife. “Elinor, how can you—”

“Be quiet, Oscar. We are not remaining in this house another night. Not one more night.”

“But what about Miriam?”

“James,” said Elinor. “I want to know if I can borrow Roxie for a while.”

“Ohhh,” said James, “Elinor, I wish you would. Grace and I eat over here all the time anyway. I pay Roxie five dollars a week for sitting down ten hours a day at the kitchen table. She has memorized fourteen chapters of the book of Job!”

Oscar was staring stuporously at his child, cradled in Sister’s arms. Sister had backed away from the table and stood actually in the next room, though visible to all through the opened doors.

“Elinor, are we just gone leave her here, while we go next door?”

Elinor folded her napkin and rose from the table. “Oscar,” she said, “we have got a lot of packing to do, and you should change out of those clothes.”

“But our little girl…” Though no one interrupted him, Oscar broke off when a shaft of enlightenment, bright as the sun outside, suddenly pierced his brain. The entire business had been planned. Elinor had seen that the only way to get him out of Mary-Love’s house was to replace him with something that Mary-Love loved even more. And for that reason, Miriam had been born. Elinor had given birth not to a daughter so much as to a hostage. And Miriam had been left at home all day so that Mary-Love and Sister might become attached to her. And Elinor’s feint of going away with Oscar and her daughter had been only that—a feint. She had intended from the first to offer up Miriam—to toss the infant off the back of the sleigh to the ravening wolves so that he and she might escape whole.

Oscar looked around the table. No one else understood—not even Mary-Love and Sister. He caught his wife’s eye, and what he saw there made him realize that he was right—and that she understood that he understood.

“Oscar,” she said quietly, “are you ready to start packing?”

He stood from the table, and dropped his napkin upon the seat of his chair. Mary-Love and Sister stood in the doorway, both with their hands upon his daughter, rocking her back and forth, and cooing.

Within the hour he and Elinor were gone, having abandoned their daughter without another word.

END OF PART I

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